



## Silverite by Luddleston

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**Summary:**

Carver Hawke was dying.

That was what the constant refrain in his head told him, anyway. Dying, dying, *dying*, each pulse of his sluggish heart sending the pain of his own imminent demise through the network of black veins laced up his neck and down his arms.

The sad bit was, he couldn't even remember how he *got* the fucking Taint.

Carver Hawke's Joining, and everything that happens after.

# 1. Chapter 1

## Author's Note:

I just have a lot of love in my heart for Carver, and I finally played Awakening so I know more things about Warden Business so that means I can write Warden Carver Adventures: The Fic: The One Where He Smooches Alistair.

Many thanks to Icky [@miraculan](#) for letting me borrow their worldstate, as my Amell is married to Alistair, which might make him and Carver's whole thing a little weird. If you like this and you like handers, you should read their stuff!

Carver Hawke was dying.

That was what the constant refrain in his head told him, anyway. Dying, dying, *dying*, each pulse of his sluggish heart sending the pain of his own imminent demise through the network of black veins laced up his neck and down his arms.

The sad bit was, he couldn't even remember how he *got* the fucking Taint. All he could assume was that some darkspawn blood managed to get into one of the many little cuts and scrapes their journey had given him, but he didn't know what was the culprit, which of the darkspawn had killed him. Not like he knew exactly which darkspawn killed Bethany.

At least he'd see her again, in whatever afterlife he found at the end of this tunnel full of darkspawn.

"Does it hurt too terribly? I can give you something for the pain, but I worry it might slow you down."

Anders, of all people, was under Carver's arm, propping him up. In these shadowy caverns, it was easier to see the Warden he had been, his jaw set and his step steadier than Carver's. He had Carver's sword slung over his shoulder next to his own staff, and Carver could feel wiry, corded muscle

that hid under his coat. Anders was stronger than he looked. Good. Garrett needed people who were stronger than they looked.

"How much longer?" he asked, his own voice sounding terribly small and weak.

"Not long, little brother," Anders said. "One foot in front of the other, like I said. Let's go."

If he was calling Carver something so kind, Carver must have looked like a right wreck.

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After the fact, Carver couldn't remember his Joining. Most of the other Wardens who traveled with Stroud had stories about theirs, which they swapped while Carver recovered, as if welcoming their new member with recollections of the moment they had given themselves up to their Order.

Carver couldn't quite relate. All of them had *chosen* to become Wardens, even if they'd been pushed toward it given the circumstances of their lives prior to that decision ("no well-adjusted man becomes a Warden," Stroud said, his only contribution to the discussion). Carver, on the other hand, hadn't decided to become a Warden any more than he'd decided to come to Kirkwall, or decided to venture into the Deep Roads. He felt like he'd made a choice, but he hadn't.

He pondered this ruefully, curled into a ball in front of a campfire in the Deep Roads, hunger warring with exhaustion inside his body. The last *real* choice he made, he thought, was the decision to join King Cailan's army at Ostagar. And look how that had turned out.

The senior Warden of the group was a Dalish elf who looked like he'd been in the Order for decades, his curly dark hair shot with grays and his face wrinkled where it wasn't scarred. One of his eyes was blind and glassy, a scar cutting through it and warping the tissue beneath. He stayed awake with Carver, looking at the firelight. Carver wasn't sure if he'd been told to mind him, or if he was just inclined to taking care of those recently Joined.

"You're strong, to have made it through the Joining as you did, even Tainted as you were," the elf said, poking at the fire with a stick. "Most times, when somebody is that close to death, the Joining is just as final as a dagger to the ribs."

At least this made Carver feel better about Wesley. He'd been thinking all this time, what if there were Wardens close enough that they could have healed Aveline's poor husband? Silly thought. Carver hadn't known the man well, and the first thing Wesley had wanted was to turn Bethany and Garrett over to the chantry. "I'm just lucky that way, I suppose."

"Strength is not mere luck. Your spirit is tenacious."

"Thank you, Sarienue," Carver said, his voice dropping on the man's name, worried he wasn't pronouncing it correctly.

"I often think," Sarienue said, "that those who have experienced great suffering make better Wardens, and they are more likely to survive the Joining than somebody who undertakes it fresh from a life without grief. I can only imagine what you went through to become so strong."

Carver laughed humorlessly. "Only a lost father, a lost battle, my sister being killed in the Blight, my family barely scraping by in Kirkwall..." He trailed off, clearing his throat. "Don't let me start complaining. I'll never stop."

"You've a right to complain, if it's all that bad," Sarienue said, picking up his pack. "Eat, and then tell me. I am not so old I've forgotten the hunger that claws at you after the Joining. And while you eat, I'll tell you what I survived that drew me to the Wardens."

"We should sleep," Carver said. It was impossible to tell time in the Deep Roads, but everybody was asleep. They didn't keep watch. They could feel the darkspawn coming long before they reached the camp. Carver couldn't, yet. He wasn't looking forward to it.

"I don't think you can," Sarienue said, "and I am in no need of rest, myself. I will have plenty of it soon."

They talked a long time.

Carver had never told anybody all of it at once—his father's slow and inexplicable death, the soldiers who had to pull him off the field at Ostagar before he got himself killed, the abrupt way he'd learnt what it sounded like when an ogre broke a body on the rocks and then he turned around and it had been his *sister*, and the sinking regret that burrowed deeper and deeper into his heart the longer he was in Kirkwall. It felt good to lift those stories from where they sank into his chest, to offer them to somebody who would listen and who would not belittle him for how he'd allowed his life to beat him into a twisted shape.

Sarienne had his own story of awful things done to him and his clan, of how humans hammered the light out of his world the way darkspawn had done as much to Carver. He said it all with much more ease than Carver told his own story, and though his words were painful to hear, it was soothing, almost, to know somebody could pull themselves through the wreckage of their past and still come out a whole person on the other side. Sarienne seemed to credit this all to the Wardens, said they made him a better person, and Carver came out of their conversation proud to be a part of the order who had turned a man's life around like this.

Maybe it could do the same for him.

"The Wardens," Sarienne said, "have a way of finding folk who are lost, and putting them back on their feet. You'll find your path eventually, Carver, and we'll be lucky to have you among us."

It wasn't quite like something his father would say, but it was close enough to make Carver childishly shy, scratching at the shaggy beard he'd ended up with after weeks of Deep Roads travel so he could hide his smile.

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Carver's desperate hunger subsided eventually, and the nightmares eased. Stroud informed them they were getting close to the end of their journey, and would be reemerging only to take ship back across the Waking Sea to Amaranthine, where the Wardens had their keep.

That night, Sarienue sat beside Carver, as he'd come to most days. He was one of the few who didn't constantly speak to the others in Orlesian. Carver had no clue what they were saying, but it made him feel as if they were talking behind his back, so he preferred to talk to Sarienue. Besides, Sarienue had an elvhen accent like Merrill's, and it was nice to listen to him speak, even if the low, rumbling timbre didn't resemble any Dalish friend Carver had left behind in Kirkwall.

Sarienue handed Carver two books that night.

"It is customary for Wardens to keep journals of their travels, so that any new information we learn about the darkspawn can be passed on to the next generation of Wardens," he said. "This one is for you, to keep your own records."

The book was bound in black leather, with a cover that wrapped around to protect the edges of the pages. It closed with a tied strap, a braided cord of the same dark leather.

"And what is the other?" Carver asked.

"This one is mine," Sarienue said, handing it to him.

"Am I meant to read it, as a part of my training?" Carver turned it in his hands. It was a similar book, but much more battered and scarred, dents and nicks all over the leather cover.

"Certainly, you may," Sarienue said. "But I am tasking you with taking it to the Warden-Commander, for inclusion into the library, along with those of all the Wardens who have gone to their Calling."

"I..." His throat was suddenly dry. He didn't know what the Calling was, exactly; it wasn't like they handed out a book of instructions when he joined up that explained all the Warden things. But when Sarienue said it with such gravitas, it didn't sound like something you came back from. "What do you mean?"



"We Wardens have a limited lifespan, and I've come to the end of it," Sarienue said, his eyes crinkling in the corners with a sad smile. "If we're not killed in the line of duty, we begin to go mad. After thirty years or so, we hear the Calling, the voice of the collective darkspawn mind, as the taint which is already in our blood starts to deteriorate us. It is the noble tradition of Wardens to die honorably in the Deep Roads, fighting the darkspawn to our last breath."

"No," Carver said, the force of it like a punch to the gut. "You're saying you're going to—but you *can't*, somebody's got to show me the ropes over in Amaranthine." He tried to hand the journal back to Sarienue.

"It is what I came to the Deep Roads to do." Sarienue laid a hand over Carver's on top of the book. "I am sorry I did not tell you what I was bound for straight away."

"It's suicide, is what you're doing," Carver said.

"In a way, it is. You don't know what it's like." Sarienue pressed fingers to his temple, bowing his head. "To slowly feel yourself losing your grasp. It is, of course, difficult to choose to go, but it is our duty as Wardens. *'In death, sacrifice,'* Carver Hawke."

Carver scrubbed at his eyes. "Isn't there any way to... keep a hold on yourself?"

"For centuries, men have tried. I would rather walk into the depths with my head high than become one of those who must be left there by force, trying to fight their way out fully mad." He lifted his head, meeting Carver's eyes. "And it is a comfort to know I have you to ensure I am remembered."

"I will," Carver said. "I won't forget you."

"Good man." Sarienue patted him on the cheek, surprisingly playful for such a somber moment. "I'm sorry you have to learn the ugly truths of the Wardens before you get to learn the joyful ones, but I promise it's not all so dour. There is a kind of camaraderie among us that I have never

experienced elsewhere, and I am certain the Warden-Commander will take good care of you."

"Do you know her?" Carver wasn't really sure why he asked. Perhaps he wanted a reassurance—to know that he would be passed into the care of somebody connected to the first person to show him genuine kindness among the Wardens.

"Not personally. But that is the way Wardens are—we take care of our own."

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Carver wasn't the only one who got teary over leaving Sarienue behind in the Deep Roads. There were words spoken, formal ones, like this was a funeral before the funeral, and they all bade him goodbye and wished him luck in the Deep.

*"Until, one day, we join you,"* they all chorused, but Carver didn't, because he didn't know the words.

He embraced Sarienue before he left, thanked him, and wanted to say something else, but it stuck in his throat. Carver didn't know what it was like to be aware he was never going to see somebody again, to have last words to give. Even back when he'd been so sure he was dying, he didn't know what to say to Garrett. He couldn't remember what he'd said to his mother before he left for the Deep Roads, and though he'd known the danger of what he was doing, he was certain that whatever he told her had no finality.

"We're supposed to die wearing these," Sarienue said, unclasping the pendant from around his neck, which somewhat resembled the one Carver wore, and contained the blood of the darkspawn who'd made him a Warden, "but I'd rather you keep it. You don't have a lot to hold onto, lad. Someday you will, and then you take it off, and put it somewhere safe."

"But—are you sure?"

"There's a strange thing about walking toward death. I'm sure of everything, now."

"I wasn't," Carver said.

"That's because you weren't walking toward death." Sarienue pulled Carver forward, and pressed their foreheads together in a gesture that he thought might be Dalish, for he'd seen Merrill do it affectionately to Isabela or Garrett from time to time. "You were walking toward a new life. May you live it as well as I did."

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After that, the other Wardens started talking with Carver a bit more often. As it turned out, they weren't trying to talk behind his back, they were just terribly Orlesian and not terribly good at correcting themselves when they fell into their native tongue at random. Still, he wasn't exactly fast friends with any of them. And he was prickly when he was grieving. He'd done enough of it to know that by now.

Coming out of the Deep Roads was a relief, and crossing back over the Waking Sea wasn't as terrible a journey as it had been the way over, although he carried a fresh loss with him once more. It was a much shorter trip than the road between Kirkwall and Gwaren, at least, only a few days' time instead of two full weeks.

Carver didn't realize how many little things about Ferelden he'd missed until he was out of Kirkwall. Amaranthine's bustling port didn't resemble Lotharing much at all, but it was so thoroughly *Ferelden*, cobbled streets instead of dirt roads, buildings made of brick instead of granite slabs or beige stucco. No massive bronze statuary or iron spikes or anything so northern as to offend Carver's sensibilities. The air smelled a bit like fish, but it was fresher than any breeze you got in Kirkwall.

There was a day's travel between the village of Amaranthine and Vigil's Keep, but there wasn't room in the local inn for a group of six, so they ended up camping along the road. The weather was alright for it, but still, Carver would rather a bed. He was looking forward to one when they got to

the Vigil, even if he remembered how poor a soldier's accommodations were. Couldn't be worse than Gamlen's.

Vigil's Keep was a work in progress. The darkspawn, Stroud had informed Carver, had stormed the Keep almost a year ago, and though the wall had held, the siege had left it in a dreadful state. Stroud and his band of Wardens were sticking around to assist with renovations, and Carver assumed he would be called upon to assist. A few of the others had complained that they were being asked to work that a stonemason's hirelings should, but Carver didn't mind hard work, especially when it was more honest than any job he'd had in the Free Marches.

The courtyard had a small number of outbuildings (some of which were being reconstructed) and a forge, which seemed to still be functioning, although there was some kind of commotion from that direction which Carver did not wish to be involved in.

He was introduced to an older fellow called Varel, who handled day-to-day operations of the Keep, and who gave Carver and all the Orlesian Wardens a brief tour and showed them to their rooms. The room itself was a surprise—it was small, but it was a single room, no soldier's bunk. There was a rack for weapons and a stand for armor he did not yet have, but would be fitted for soon enough.

He had his own bed, and his own bathroom off to the side. There was a trunk half-shoved under the bed, and when he opened it, it looked like books and clothes, probably belonging to the last occupant of the room. Carver pushed it all the way beneath to ignore it, figuring he'd deal with it later. The bed, at present, was the most welcome part of the room. Carver was not meant to report anywhere until tomorrow, and had been told the rest of the day was his own, to rest and recover from the journey.

And he was fucking *exhausted*, so that meant he went straight to sleep.

He woke naturally in the middle of the night, more hungry than he was tired, but with no idea where the larder was. Nor had he any idea whether he was allowed to take something from the kitchens, or if their meals were rationed like soldiers'.

Figuring there was no sense in lying about here when he could be finding out for himself, he got up, dressed in the everyday, non-armor uniform he'd been given (a little short in the sleeves, so he rolled them up to the elbow) and went about trying to find the kitchen. He guessed downstairs, and found he must have been correct, because he could smell something like roasted meat and fresh bread, the idea of which was absolutely *heavenly* after being stuck in the Deep Roads for so many weeks, surviving on dried foods and mushrooms.

There was the clatter of flatware and the soft noise of conversation as he drew closer, and he found a group of people at one end of a long dining table, laid as if this was a normal time for supper and not the dead of night.

The person at the head of the table was a woman, slim and dark-headed, leaning back in her chair with her boots kicked up on the table. She wasn't eating, but she had a pipe in one hand, and she tipped her head back to exhale smoke before meeting Carver's eye. "You must be new. Are you one of the Orlesians, or are you the Marcher they picked up in the Deep Roads?"

"I'm the *Ferelden* they picked up in the Deep Roads," Carver corrected her.

"So you are!" said the man sitting to her right, "that accent speaks for itself." He *also* had a very Ferelden accent, and a mabari curled up by his seat, so clearly his words weren't an admonishment, just an acknowledgment.

"Don't just stand there in the shadows like a tit, join us," said a redheaded dwarf who was drinking from a tankard bigger than his head (which was impressive, because his head was very large).

"Yes, please do." The woman at the head of the table gestured to the meal laid out. "You must be hungry, if you're that new."

He couldn't deny it. The man who had remarked on Carver's accent pulled out the seat next to his so Carver could sit, and if anybody at the table was bothered by the fact that Carver was eating before introductions had been made, they didn't say anything.

It was a small group, all of them dressed in Warden blue. In addition to the three who'd spoken to Carver, there were three others: a woman with Dalish tattoos, a dwarf with even more ink on her face than the Dalish, and a quiet man who sat at the far end of the group and glowered. Carver couldn't be sure whether he was actually in an impressively bad mood, or if that was just his face.

They were talking about the reconstruction of the Keep. One dwarf was trying to propose a bigger wine cellar, and the other dwarf was trying to propose a sunroom which, the elf kept reminding her, would not actually get that much use, given how cold it was half the year here.

"What if it had a greenhouse in, Velanna?" asked the man sitting beside Carver. He was probably about Carver's age, and although the room was in semi-darkness lit only by a low fire, it was clear he was what Mother might call '*classically handsome*'. Angular face, golden hair, all of it. "You'd like it if it had a greenhouse, I'll bet."

"It is true, I'm not looking forward to my garden dying off in winter," said the elf. "Very well. If it has a greenhouse, I will allow it."

"Didn't realize you were the final word on renovations," said the dwarven man.

"I *should* be. I have better ideas than '*a wine cellar so big we can start our own brewery*'."

"What else're we gonna do with all those feckin' basements!?"

"Wall them off?" suggested the sour-faced man, his first contribution to the conversation.

"Waste of a good basement," said the dwarven woman. "It would at least make a good storeroom."

"For *beer*."

"Oghren. No." This came from the woman at the head of the table, and reduced Oghren to grumbling into his tankard. "We'll use the main area of the basements for storage, but it might do to bring in somebody who researches the Avaar before we go walling off the bits used by the cult."

*This* piqued Carver's attention too much to keep him quiet. "There was a *cult* in the basement of the Keep?"

"Yup," said the dwarven woman. "Creepy statues and everything. Arl Howe was into some weird shit. No offense, Nathaniel."

There was a scoff from the far end of the table.

"Right," said the man beside Carver, after a bit of a pause in which everybody contemplated the basement cult, "is anybody going to introduce ourselves to the newest member of our order, here, or am I going to have to do it for you?"

"I was so hoping you would," said the woman at the head of the table.

"No manners among the lot of you," he said, shaking his head. "Well, I'm Alistair, that's Will, Sigrun, Velanna, Nathaniel, and Oghren." It was rather a lot of names, and Carver thought it was very possible he'd forget one or two.

"I'm Carver Hawke," Carver said, very glad he was not being offered any handshakes, because he definitely still had food on his fingers.

The mabari, as if not wanting to be left out, sat up and bumped Carver's elbow with his nose.

"And that's Turnip," Alistair added.

"You named your mabari... *Turnip*?"

"He's Will's, she named him. He just sits by me because he knows I'll give him treats, don't you?"

Turnip wagged and panted in that way mabari did. In keeping with his word, Alistair slipped Turnip a bit of roast chicken.

"You're going to make him fat," Will grouched, blowing more smoke at the ceiling.

"Not if he gets plenty of exercise," Alistair said, scratching Turnip's head, making his face wrinkle up.

"That damn *cat* gets plenty of exercise, and he's still as round as Oghren," Nathaniel said.

"Don't go comparing me to that thing," Oghren said, slumping forward and leaning onto the table as if imbibing so much had turned him mostly liquid and he was sloshing. "Awful beast, it is."

"We take all sorts, in the Wardens," Alistair said, pouring himself another drink and then leaning back in his chair. "You'll get to know everybody soon enough, Hawke."

"The cat's not a Warden," Will corrected him. "The mabari is, though."

"I don't think cats can actually *get* the taint," Alistair said. "Don't ask where I heard that, I can't remember at all. Maybe I thought it up myself."

Carver, for his part, was still stuck on the fact that Alistair called him '*Hawke*'.



## 2. Chapter 2

### Summary for the Chapter:

Carver trains with the Wardens, befriends a local cat, and does more snooping than he expected to do.

### Notes for the Chapter:

And now we have the most IMPORTANT character, Ser Pounce-a-lot, joining the scene!

Also, the draft of this has officially gotten horny, so as of ch. 4 it's gonna be bumped up to explicit. Everyone's horny for Carver, ok?

Carver was a bit groggy when he reported for duty the next day, having stayed until the late hour at which the other Wardens finally went off to bed. They weren't exactly what anybody would call *good conversationalists*, spending most of their time arguing without any concern for confused, new parties to their debates. Maker, though, they were entertaining.

And opinionated.

Carver wondered if they ever took all these thoughts to the Warden-Commander, or if they just rolled them back and forth without any real purpose, with Alistair to attempt the occasional compromise and Will to mediate with a respectable finality. Nathaniel hardly ever opined, but when he did, he was fierce about it, especially when it came to Vigil's Keep. Carver had gleaned that Nathaniel was Nathaniel *Howe*, son of the late Arl Howe, who had once owned the Keep, which meant this was Nathaniel's childhood home. Carver could respect wanting to preserve that. Especially if you grew up in a bloody *castle*.

Carver was irritated with his own tiredness, because he wasn't up to his usual during training. It didn't help that the training sword was smaller than he was used to (when he said this aloud, Alistair laughed) and not weighted very well.

He was going up against Alistair, who, despite looking like he might be even younger than Carver, apparently had the seniority to be sparring new recruits to get an idea of their potential.

Alistair had the gall not to look tired at all, or perhaps he just hadn't had an early morning on reconstruction duties (which mostly involved carrying heavy things). He was fresh-faced and pleasant, and kept shouting things that he probably thought were encouraging, but came off as cajoling when he was kicking Carver's arse left, right, and center.

"Closer, on that one!" he called, as he dodged another of Carver's strikes that *would* have landed if Carver had his two-hander. "You really are used to a longer reach, aren't you?"

"Not been bullshitting you just to cover my arse, no," Carver said.

"I didn't say you were," Alistair said, "just observing."

"Observe more quietly, then." Carver parried, which he was good at, at least, enough strength behind his guard to deflect Alistair's blows.

"Can't." Alistair struck again, a series of quick movements that were meant to overwhelm a foe. Carver parried most of them and dodged the last one, but gave up a few good steps of ground to do it. "All my thoughts come aloud."

It reminded Carver of the way Garrett used to commentate on Carver's training, trying to throw him off his rhythm just to watch him trip up. Alistair wasn't being quite so malicious, but he was putting Carver off his game, so Carver came after him hard, a powerful blow that was a little too much for practice. It could've broken Alistair's arm if he didn't dodge correctly. Or if a neatly spelled shield hadn't come up between them at the last second.

For a moment, Carver thought Alistair was some sort of weird mage, but then he saw Will behind, a staff in hand. He'd pinned her for a rogue, honestly. Standing, she was nearly of a height with Carver and Alistair, and

there was a coldness in her eye that reminded Carver of his mother when she was very, very cross.

"He's good," was all she said.

"Yeah," said Alistair.

"Of course he bloody is," said Carver, who could speak for himself, even if he was a little winded. He shook out his sword arm—the aftershocks that traveled up his nerves from banging up against a magical shield felt a little like electricity, and it was worse when he was fighting with such a shit sword. "I was a mercenary for a year and a soldier before then. I know how to fight. I'm good for it."

"So it seems," Will replied. "Alistair, don't spend all your time on one Warden. I want you to suss out the Orlesians, figure out how they'd be best split up into hunting parties."

"You've got it," Alistair said.

Will turned and walked away from them. Carver wasn't sure what kind of authority she wielded, exactly—it may very well have been that Alistair was just happy to follow suggestions from his fellows. But it meant his attention was turning from Carver, which meant the spar was officially over. Carver had no more chance to prove himself.

"Good match, Hawke," Alistair said, extending a hand.

Carver shook it, still feeling buzzing annoyance at the ease with which Alistair brushed him off, even though he'd come at him with full battering-ram force and would've done some damage if not for Will.

Alistair only smiled.

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The Orlesians were being Orlesian when Carver walked into the dining hall (at the proper dinner hour, this time). One of them lifted his head from the

rest of the group, and said, "I heard one of the new recruits challenged the Warden-Commander in training today. Was it you, or another Ferelden?"

"You can't just *ask* somebody that, Pierre," muttered a woman, who Carver thought was named Jeanne.

"Must have been somebody else," Carver said. "I didn't do much at all in training, really. Do Wardens *ever* fight with anything other than sword and shield?" He couldn't even imagine doing all that with a shield. He wouldn't know what to do with his other hand. He was gonna bring *his* sword to training tomorrow.

"Plenty of them are archers," said Jeanne.

"Had to leave behind that two-hander, yes?" Pierre, unfortunately, followed Carver's train of irritation.

"Not making that mistake again," Carver said. He looked around for Alistair or Will or any of the others he'd met the night before, but it seemed they only gathered around in the small hours of the morning.

He was far too exhausted, or else he'd look for them there again.

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On Carver's second full day at Vigil's Keep, he was told to report to the forge so he could be measured for his armor. He was both thrilled and anxious for this. He'd never worn full armor on the regular before, only leathers, and while he was a bit enamored with the Warden blue-and-silverite, he worried that much plate might slow him down in a fight.

The forge was just as chaotic as he'd been led to believe. It was run by two men who seemed like a comedic pair in a play, bickering back and forth in a way that meant they were either bitter enemies or perhaps had been married for many years. Depended on how serious they were. The younger, less bald of the men was measuring Carver while the older, extremely bald one went on about how glad he was the Wardens had finally presented him with an

*impressive specimen of manhood* and how he wanted to include sculpted griffons on the armor.

Carver let out a breath he'd been wanting to exhale for some time when Will strolled up, like a dark slip of a shadow in her blue robes, her staff hitting the ground at an even tempo as she walked.

"Hawke," she said, nodding at him. "Herren. Wade. Will we have enough silverite to cover this entire fellow, or do you need me to run out and find another deposit?"

Wade, the bald fellow, said, "of course we've enough silverite—could you find me ironbark? *That* would be a joy to work with, I'll assure you." He seemed to be missing some sarcasm Will was directing his way.

"I'll keep an eye out." She gave a curious tilt of her head, addressing Carver. "Someday he's going to learn I'm not his errand boy."

"One would think, based on the armor *he* probably made you, he'd guess you're a Warden," Carver said.

"One would think." Will leaned against the rail of the pavilion that made up the forge, her staff resting beside her, her arms crossed. "I'm here because I'm curious about you, Carver Hawke. I figured that while you're in the middle of that—" she gestured at Herren, who had a measuring tape in a bit of an uncomfortable place, "—I'll have your full attention."

"Truly, you have caught me while I can't escape," said Carver, desperately wishing Herren would measure somewhere not-crotch-adjacent.

Will smiled, a slip of white teeth between dark-painted lips. When she smiled, she looked a little more like a girl—like Bethany, actually. That, and the fact that Herren had moved on to measuring his legs for greaves, made Carver relax just a bit.

"I'm told you were on an expedition into the Deep Roads and were Tainted. Surely... you weren't down there by yourself, were you?"

"No," Carver said. It was no wonder the story of his Joining had spread, given how miraculous the others seemed to think his survival was. "I had my brother with me. He was a partner in an expedition with these two dwarves—except one of the dwarves fucked off and left us for dead."

He wondered whether he'd been Tainted before Bartrand screwed them over, or after. How long did it take to show? If they'd gone back to the surface as intended, would he have just died up there, the Wardens too far away to help?

"So, you, your brother, and this dwarf." She raised a finger for each one, like ticking off a box. "Three men survive being left in the Deep Roads, manage to find the Wardens, and keep you alive?"

"Four," Carver said. "There was another fellow with us." He turned at Herren's direction, so he could get measurements of his chest and shoulders, which meant he didn't have to look at Will while he carefully talked around anything that would get Anders found by the order that he was, for some reason, trying to flee. Carver owed him that much. "Friend of my brother's. A healer. I'm sure he's why I lived as long as I did—but I was sort of in and out of consciousness. Barely know how we made it to the Wardens."

This much was true. It was all sort of fuzzy and overlaid with pain.

"But none among you had any connection with the Wardens?" Will asked. It was almost as if she *knew*... perhaps she suspected.

Carver told her the only lie he'd given in their conversation: "not that I know of. But my brother is pretty good at miraculously getting out of tough scrapes."

"It seems your family is blessed in such a manner," Will said.

"And cursed. You know, with getting into the scrapes in the first place." Carver breathed a sigh of relief as the conversation trailed into more general territory and Herren finally finished winding his tape measure around every single part of Carver's body.

Will gave him a noncommittal shrug and then said, "once you get your armor, I'd like you on a team fighting back the remaining darkspawn. If you've gone through the Deep Roads, you'll do well there."

She left Carver to the smith's designs, which meant he was caught between a rather extensive argument and didn't manage to free himself until supper.

— — —

There was something scratching at Carver's door in the dead of night.

At first, he figured it was a mouse, and he rolled over, pulling his blankets higher. Then, the scratching continued, and it was accompanied with a loud, warbling yowl.

It was enough to get Carver to his feet.

On the other side of the door was a cat: round and striped and probably orange, although it was hard to tell in the dark. He looked up at Carver with big round eyes and meowed again, and Carver recalled Nathaniel saying something about a cat in the keep. It was wearing a braided collar, like a miniature version of the sort Will's mabari wore.

"Go away," Carver said. The cat wound itself around his legs. "Go on, shoo. You're not supposed to be in here. I think."

The cat stood its ground and continued to meow instead of taking any suggestion, so Carver assumed the best thing to do for it was to take it to whomever the cat belonged. Nathaniel, maybe. He hadn't sounded fond of it, but if he wasn't its owner, he'd know who was.

Carver put on his boots and scooped up the cat, realizing he was banking on the assumption that the Wardens were up all hours of the night, and would be in the dining hall again. He was wrong—it was empty.

"I'm not sure where I ought to take you," he told the cat, who was purring now instead of howling. Carver had never been much of a cat person, but this animal seemed much more accommodating than the barn cats in

Lothering. Those had been half-feral beasts who'd hiss every time you came near, even the kittens.

There was noise from a side room, and the door was open, so Carver poked his head in. It was a small sitting room, with a fire lit in the hearth and several couches, occupied by most of the same band of Wardens he'd met the first night. Oghren was snoring rather loudly, but the others seemed to be awake, and Sigrun hopped up from her chair as soon as she saw Carver standing in the doorway.

"You found Pounce!" she said, gleefully hefting the cat out of his arms.

"Er, well, *Pounce* found me. Is he yours?" Carver asked.

"He's the Keep's," Sigrun said, setting Pounce onto a footstool. "Where'd you find him?"

"Shouting outside my door." It'd be hard to believe the animal had been in such distress, given how perfectly happy he seemed to be now, curling up in his place. "He's the Keep's mouser, then?"

"When he's not being fed table scraps," Nathaniel said drily.

Sigrun scratched the cat on the head. "He's Ser Pounce-a-lot," she said. "He used to belong to the fellow who had your room, that's probably why he was outside the door."

"Ser... Pounce-a-lot? What kind of person names a cat that?" Carver asked.

"Anders," Sigrun said.

Velanna looked up from the book she'd been writing in (with particular angry force to the strokes of her pen) but she met Nathaniel's eye, not Sigrun's.

It *had* to be the same Anders, right?

Carver couldn't imagine there was more than one Ferelden Warden nicknamed Anders who formerly lived at Vigil's Keep and had a cat. At



least, he thought he recalled Anders mentioning something about a cat. He couldn't quite see Anders naming an animal something so ludicrous, but perhaps he'd been a different man in his younger years, before he got all... imbued with justice.

"That's the name of the fellow the cat belonged to?" Carver asked. "Is he... gone?"

"He is." This was Nathaniel, who stood up from the couch he'd been lounging on, picked up an empty cup, and brushed past Carver on the way out the door. There was something rigid and pricklier than Nathaniel's usual resting irritability. Carver, who was often prickly and irritable, recognized it as a touched nerve.

"Nathaniel's spent the better part of a year trying to track Anders down," Sigrun explained. "He and... he and another of our companions disappeared a while back, along with a new recruit who was found dead. The other friend of ours is gone. We found his body. But Nate's convinced Anders is still alive."

"His theories are plausible," Velanna said.

Sigrun sat on the floor beside the footstool where Ser Pounce-a-lot lounged, leaning her head on the cushion beside the cat and running her fingers along its fur. "Yeah, they are. But as somebody who's known a lotta folks who've gone and disappeared... that makes it worse, sometimes, you know?"

"They were close?" Carver ventured. He didn't draw nearer, just leaned against the doorframe, not wanting to seem overly invested in something that was not, for all they knew, his business.

"They were lovers," Sigrun said.

Velanna's nose wrinkled. "Nathaniel has *awful* taste."

This alone gave Carver the feeling they were probably talking about the same Anders.

— — —  
Carver was no spy. Subterfuge didn't come naturally to him.

But he had a chance to perhaps learn a little about Garrett's close companion (who apparently had a Warden lover he didn't tell anybody about, but who also had been mooning over Garrett and, reportedly, *involved* with that mage they tried to rescue) and he was going to take it.

The first thing he investigated was his own room. Before, he'd just found it sort of annoying that the Warden who'd previously occupied his bedroom had left a thing or two there, but now, it was *information*. Information for what, Carver wasn't sure. Maybe just for writing to Garrett and saying, '*hey, brother, it might be a bad idea to fall into bed with Anders*'.

As if Garrett would ever take Carver's advice on something so personal. As if Garrett would ever take Carver's advice on anything at all.

Bethany would have. She'd believed Carver when he told her that boy from out of town was bad news, and then when the lad had joined the templars, she'd thanked Carver for steering her away from a broken heart. But Garrett was always busy making people fall in love with him left and right.

Maybe it was a good thing Garrett was so interested in Anders, now. Not like Carver could be jealous over *Anders*. It wouldn't be like when Garrett snuck off with Isabela after drinks, or told dirty jokes to Merrill... Not that any of that ought to matter to Carver anymore, either. He'd not see Garrett or any of Garrett's friends for some time, now.

He lifted the corner of his bedcover and pulled out the trunk he'd slid under there his first night in the room. It wasn't locked, or spelled with some kind of ward. Clearly, Anders hadn't been expecting it to be left here to be discovered by unsuspecting Warden recruits.

The contents were as follows:

Two paper-back romance novels, both of which took place in Antiva, and one of which had a bookmark which opened to show that the reader

(Anders, assumedly) had stopped right in the middle of a very explicit scene, or else had marked it so that he could easily return to it. Carver, for his part, stopped as soon as he read the word 'member'.

Several cat toys, which probably had something to do with Carver's nighttime disturbance. Had Pounce just been waiting on somebody with thumbs to open up this box and return these to him? Carver was starting to feel bad for the cat, and set aside the toys so that he could give them back.

A collection of healing potions that were so old they'd congealed inside the bottles, which Carver planned to dump in the trash at first opportunity.

A tin of dried elfroot, the lid of which had popped open and spilled its contents all over the bottom of the trunk, leaving a crackly, herbal-smelling layer of grit on the bottom.

A shirt, plain black but made of very fine fabric. Silk, maybe, with a little embroidered detail that was also done in black thread around the cuffs and the neckline, so you could hardly see it, but you could run your fingers along and know it was finely crafted. It was the sort of thing nobility would wear, and certainly *not* something Carver pictured as part of Anders' wardrobe. Black wouldn't exactly be his color, anyhow. He wondered under what occasion Anders would have worn it.

Carver sighed, stuffing the shirt and the novels back in the box and the box back under his bed. He didn't even know if Anders and Garrett and Varric made it back to Kirkwall alive. He'd been functioning on that assumption, yes, but it was really just that he couldn't bear the alternative.

Perhaps he'd feel better snooping once he knew they were alright.

Ser Pounce-a-lot returned that night, and happily accepted the gift of his toys, paying particularly special attention to a tiny stuffed mouse with felt ears and a yarn tail. Carver wondered where Anders got it, maybe a shop in Amaranthine. It was sweet to watch Pounce bat it back and forth, and eventually, Carver learned that if he tossed the toy across the room, Pounce would fetch it like a hound with a stick.

The cat slept on Carver's bed. Carver let it. At least it wasn't a great slobbering hound trying to lay on his head and suffocate him like Garrett's damn dog did.

And perhaps both of them could use some company.

**Notes for the Chapter:**

Carver may never know this, but YOU all now know: the shirt in Anders' box of stuff belongs to Nate.

### 3. Chapter 3

#### Summary for the Chapter:

Carver meets the Warden-Commander, is unwittingly involved in a discussion on magical theory, and doesn't sleep well.

The remainder of his first week passed by largely uneventfully. The crew that seemed to be *'Will-and-company'* disappeared for a mission, and Carver couldn't exactly go snooping around asking if anybody else had known a fellow called Anders.

Ser Pounce-a-lot slept on Carver's bed every night, getting steadily closer and closer until he decided his favorite spot to sleep was right in Carver's armpit. An odd choice, but it wasn't a mabari on his head.

He trained with his two-hander and made up for some discredit, he continued to help with reconstruction until they reached the point where they needed artisans instead of laborers, and he was fitted for his new armor. In his free time, he read Sarienue's journal, which was written in a manner that was disappointingly brief and curt, opposite to Sarienue's well-thought way of speaking. Carver couldn't really mind, he himself wasn't so good at saying what he meant in writing.

He did manage to craft a letter to send to Mother and one to send to Garrett, and gave those to the keep's private courier. Both of them were brief and poorly worded, but at least he'd let his family know he was alive.

He wanted to write to Anders, too, but he wasn't sure how to do so in a way that wouldn't be intercepted, if not by the Wardens, then by Gamlen, who was in the habit of reading other people's mail. If it came addressed to his house, Gamlen said, he had the right to peruse its contents.

Once he finished reading Sarienue's journal, he went looking for the Commander's office. He'd not put much effort into finding and introducing himself to the Commander, figuring that was something that happened on the Commander's time. He didn't even know the woman's name.

But Sarienue had said this was supposed to go to the Commander and then to the Wardens' libraries, so Carver was going to have to be the one to make introductions, it seemed.

The Warden-Commander's office looked a lot like the sitting room in Vigil's keep—warm wood and stone walls, thick rugs on the floor. The only difference was a massive desk instead of several lounging couches.

Will was seated behind the desk, looking at a map of Amaranthine and the surrounding territories laid out before her. Her eyes lifted when he entered, but her head didn't.

"Carver," she said.

"You're the Warden-Commander," he said.

He wasn't stupid. She was at the Warden-Commander's desk, she talked like she was in charge of everybody, and most anyone in the Keep deferred to her.

"And here I was, enjoying my anonymity." She smiled. "Warden-Commander Wilhelmina Amell, at your service. But I've decided I like you, so you can keep calling me 'Will'. 'Billie', if you're feeling particularly friendly." He'd heard Alistair and Oghren both call her that from time to time.

But he was stuck on her surname. "Amell?"

"Indeed."

"It's... are you from Kirkwall? That's my mother's surname," he explained.

"I'm from Kinloch Hold, by way of Kirkwall," Will said. She walked around to the front of her desk and leaned against it, looking curiously at him. "What's your mother's name?"

"Leandra—and my uncle's an Amell, too, he's called Gamlen."

Her eyes flicked up, as though she was trying to remember something. "I'm afraid I haven't had much cause to go looking into my family history, even after leaving the Circle," she said. "But I know enough people who can probably figure out how we're related."

"You think we *are* related, then?" he asked, feeling a little like he'd been knocked on the head. Will was the *Hero of Ferelden*, wasn't she? He ought to let his mother know—she'd brag about that to anybody who'd listen.

"Of course," Will said. "We've got the same eyes."

— — —

His sparring partner was Alistair, again. At least Carver had his two-hander this time. Fighting with sharpened blades meant they had to be more careful, but Carver was actually more precise with a larger blade, having years of experience under his belt. It was more of an even draw this time, although they weren't really fighting for a winner, just practice.

Alistair, unfortunately, was as chatty as ever.

"Will's gonna put you on my team," he said, deflecting a blow with his shield and then giving a riposte that was a little messy, and spoke of how long Alistair had already been training by the time Carver showed up. He was exhausted, and probably wasn't meant to stick around, but he had done, just to spar with Carver. "We've got Velanna, and she doesn't work well with unpracticed warriors. Stroud says you're good with a mage at your back."

Carver gave another halfhearted swing—they truly were just fooling about, now. "I'm used to fighting with mages beside me," he said. "My brother and sister both... well. I got accustomed to it."

Alistair darted around him and smacked him on the ass with the flat of his blade. "We need people like that."

"Ow."

"What?" Alistair flicked his sword back into its sheath and wrangled Carver into a semblance of a headlock, which Carver couldn't avoid because he was still holding a blade. He dropped the sword to shove, but Alistair was already holding on.

Alistair was laughing. Carver shoved harder and ducked down, finally managing to break his hold. "*Maker's balls*," Carver said, quite unable to hide he was laughing, "you're worse than Garrett."

"Who?" Alistair scuffed a hand through his sweaty hair, scraping it off his forehead.

"My brother," Carver said, unused to having to explain anything other than, '*I mean Hawke—he has got a given name, you know.*'

Alistair nodded, following Carver out of the ring and straight for the water pump. "I had a brother—met him all of once, though. Half-brother, really. All I'm saying is, it's nice you've got a brother who gives you his time."

Carver swallowed, his breath gone thick in his throat. Because Alistair had really hit the nail square there, didn't he? Garrett Hawke was the sort of person who everybody wanted time and attention from. And Carver may not have liked him some days, but he was his *brother*. "Yeah, well," he said. "Not anymore."

Alistair splashed his face with water and then shook his head, sending droplets everywhere like a wet dog shaking. "It's alright," he said. "You've got brothers in arms, now. Wardens are like family, yeah?"

Carver watched a drop of water fall from Alistair's chin and watched him lick another off the divot in the middle of his upper lip. He didn't think he exactly saw Alistair as family.

"Maker, nobody ever told me being a Warden would come with being related to *Oghren*," Carver said instead, and Alistair laughed, clapping him on the shoulder so hard he felt it through the plate.

— — —



"Hawke, you're with me."

Alistair caught him at breakfast, so Carver had a mouthful of toast with jam to swallow before he could say, "where, exactly?"

Alistair's lips pressed together in a grimace. "Kal'Hirol," he said. "We're to do another sweep, make sure there aren't any more jumped-up darkspawn who look a little chatty down there."

"I wasn't aware they were in the habit of chatting," Carver said.

"Some are. Supposedly all the talking ones cleared out, but after what Billie said about that broodmother... it'll just do for us to check." He grinned, as if he'd not just reshaped a large portion of Carver's knowledge on the darkspawn. "Ready to go back into the Deep Roads?"

"Sure," Carver said. "I could use a good fight."

"Maker's breath, you're crazy," Alistair laughed. "Walk in the park for you, eh? Last time the Deep Roads tried to chew you up, you made them spit you back out. Now you're looking back down that maw and you just say 'sure'?"

"Sure," Carver repeated.

Alistair shook his head. "You're *something*." There was a warmth in his voice, sort of pleased with Carver, maybe. Carver was still half-asleep, so he couldn't say for certain.

After he finished his breakfast, he armed and reported to the front gate of the keep, where Alistair, Sigrun, and Velanna were converging, all in Wardens' armor. Velanna, as usual, was frowning, her arms crossed, one hand loose so she could hold her staff.

"Thank the Creators," she said, "I feared they might send Oghren."

Nice to know there was somebody higher up Velanna's all-encompassing shit list than Carver.

"No, Oghren's been put in charge of a couple of new recruits," Alistair said.

"Poor kids," Sigrun said.

Alistair nodded to the guard, who raised the gate for them. "He's got Nathaniel, at least?"

Sigrun amended her previous statement. "Poor Nathaniel."

— — —

Kal'Hirol wasn't quite like the other areas of the Deep Roads that Carver had traveled, mostly because it was really fucking haunted. He could tell right when he went in, like an itch on the back of his neck.

"Don't worry," Sigrun said, when the ghosts made him jumpy, "Amell thought they were going to *attack* her."

"To be fair, we *have* been attacked by dwarven spirits in the Deep Roads before," Alistair said. "These ones are much friendlier."

That meant they *could* attack, though, and that set Carver's teeth on edge. As if the existential horror of watching somebody be doomed to repeat their dying moments on into eternity wasn't enough.

The darkspawn they were clearing out were, in fact, *worse* than the ones Carver had experienced before, because they looked like pill bugs but with little horrid faces, except sometimes they stood up, and sometimes they tackled you flat on your back and tried to chew through your armor.

There was no room for startled shrieking or even complaining about how awful the beasts were when one was doing pinning you and biting down, though. All there was to it was kicking it off, rolling out of the way, and running it through, hoping that if you stabbed it enough, it'd die.

Around him, Velanna called up vines from the earth, holding the darkspawn in place so Carver could stab them, raining stone fists down on the ones he couldn't reach. There were still too many—if she was being properly

strategic, she'd shout at them all to move, and drop down something that rained over a larger area.

Velanna was following the same train of thought Carver was, it seemed. He knew the feel of magic blooming up behind him, so he knew to get the fuck out of the way before she sent down a fireball, summarily ending the skirmish they'd found themselves in.

"*Velanna!*" Sigrun said, in a way that was distinctly scolding. "You're not supposed to aim where the swordsmen are!"

Carver shrugged. "I saw it in time."

Velanna said, "he saw it in time. You've got a sense for that, actually, don't you? Like a Dalish hunter, except you're an enormous lummoX who fights with a cleaver."

"Thanks," Carver replied drily, kicking childer guts off his boot.

"I think she's attempting to give you an actual compliment," Alistair said.

"Are you a mage?" Velanna asked him, neither confirming nor denying whether she was being complimentary.

Carver, holding what she'd just called a cleaver, gave a little scoff of laughter. "I am very clearly not."

Velanna swore in elvhen and prodded Alistair forward with her staff, making them continue off down the tunnel first. "Not everybody is so regimented about it," she said. "Some who possess the Gift are still better warriors than battlemages."

"I'm not a mage," Carver said. He couldn't hide the tinge of bitterness in it, remembering everybody looking at him his whole damn childhood with *expectation*, like since Garrett started throwing sparks at all of five years old and Bethany was just as magical, Carver ought to be a mage, too. "I've just fought alongside mages often."

"Sigrun," Velanna said. Carver was glad to hear her talk to somebody else, until he realized she was just continuing on this strange investigation into Carver's senses. "If I started a fireball in my hands, and your back was turned, would you be able to tell?"

"If you were giving off a lot of light, yeah," Sigrun said, scrambling over a rocky outcropping that Carver and Alistair just stepped past. Short legs were a bit of an inconvenience this deep in the tunnels.

"No, but if you couldn't see it." Velanna turned her back to them and cast a spell, her magic ringing and prickling through the cave air. "Can you tell what I'm doing?"

"No," Sigrun said, at the same time Carver said, "*snowball*." Carver was the one who was right—Velanna whirled around tossed a snowball straight at the back of Sigrun's head, and Sigrun yelped.

"See? *He* can tell," Velanna said. "But you can't, because you're a dwarf."

*"Right down the back of my armor, Vel, you fuck!"*

"I could tell you were doing something, too, just not what it was," Alistair said, with a shrug. "They taught us to sense magic being used in templar training. Not everybody can actually do it, though, but it seems like folk who have close relations to mages can. Maybe being around magic so long means you can sense it?"

*"So cold! How dare!"*

Velanna hummed, ignoring Sigrun's ire. "Or, perhaps, there are those who have some affinity for spellcraft, without enough mana to cast."

"Not a fucking mage," Carver said again. "No offense meant to your theory, it's just—no. I'm not."

"I didn't say you were, it's just—" Velanna groaned. "Nathaniel would listen to me about this."

"That," Sigrun said, having finally shaken all the ice she could free of her clothes, "is because Nathaniel is even better at magical theory than Anders. Remember how Nate was always talking to Justice—ah, whatever."

"No," Velanna said, suddenly as cold as the ice she'd dropped down Sigrun's back, "I can't say I recall."

— — —

The rest of the darkspawn-clearing went without incident, and they were back out of Kal'Hiol and into the fresh air the same night. From the position of the moon, it was closer to dawn than sunset, but none of them had wanted to sleep in the caves (except for Sigrun, maybe) so they had returned to the entrance, where they could shuck off what armor would pinch them in the night, settle down their packs, and rest.

Carver didn't sleep the night through. He woke with a start in darkness, a fading nightmare falling down around him and his breath coming fast to his chest.

Beside him, somebody stirred. Carver pressed a hand over his own chest, trying to remember how to breathe to get himself to calm. Whoever was beside him sat up, their shadow big enough that it must have been Alistair. Carver rubbed at the notch of his collarbone through his tunic and tried to count—was it in for a count of six, or seven? He could do this, he knew how, it was just a matter of remembering the pacing.

"All right?" Alistair asked him softly, his voice cutting through the war-drum hammer of Carver's pulse in his ears.

"Mm." Words were not quite there, yet.

Alistair got up, and then sat closer to him, so his shoulder was pressed against Carver's. "Do you get the nightmares badly? Outside a Blight and so long since your Joining, they shouldn't be too terrible, but some people have them every night."

"It wasn't those," Carver said. He knew, by now, the creeping horror of the darkspawn pressing into his mind, his awareness of them sharpening first in his sleep and then in his waking mind. He'd learnt to block that out, by now. "I have... other nightmares. Plenty." Since far before becoming a Warden. He remembered Father telling him how to keep his breath steady when he woke in a panic because he dreamt Garrett got taken away by templars. That was before they knew about Bethany, when Carver only had one mage sibling to worry about.

He only had one mage to worry about anymore, though.

"I'm sorry," Alistair said. "Do you... want to tell me what it was about?"

He only remembered vaguely, but it was enough. The stench of death all around him, the screams and agony of it, driving forward into the fray again, ready to face his Maker—and then hands closing around him, pulling him back, dragging him away just as the horde closed in.

"Ostagar."

Alistair sucked in a sharp breath between his teeth. "Ah. I get those, too."

"You were... you were there, weren't you?" He must have been. "How did you...?"

Alistair put an arm around Carver's shoulders, delicate at first, like he might spook. When he didn't, the touch settled. "The Witch of the Wilds saved me," Alistair said.

Carver expected many things, but not that.

"Swear on my life," Alistair said, taking Carver's surprised silence as disbelief. "Scary old lady, by the name of Flemeth. Apparently she turned into a bird and scooped me and Will up."

Carver half-expected to hear him say she turned into a dragon. "You too, huh?"

"What? She was pulling more soldiers off the field?" Alistair asked.

"Oh—no. Flemeth got my family..." he couldn't help choking, he was too rattled, "she got *most* of my family safe to the coast. We would've been felled by the darkspawn, all of us, but." He scrubbed at his eyes. "Me and Garrett and Mum were alright."

"You lost somebody, though," Alistair realized.

"Yeah." His voice was barely audible, a tight scrape. "My sister. My twin. Bethany."

Alistair leaned harder into him and put both arms around him. "It's the worst, isn't it? How are we supposed to go on?" His voice was thin, frayed.

Carver should've asked who Alistair lost, maybe, given some comfort in return. But all he said was, "they waited for me. They waited in Lothing, for me to come back from Ostagar, when they should have fled without me. It should have been *me*."

"Death never seems to do what we think it should," Alistair said. "I mean—I don't think it should've been you. But I know what it's like to—my mentor fell, in Ostagar, and if I could trade my life for his..." there was a burr in his voice that belied the same pain Carver felt.

"Glad you couldn't," Carver said, resting his head on Alistair's shoulder. "I mean, I'm sure he was a great man, but you're the one who's here with me and—I think—maybe. Maybe I needed somebody."

"Good," Alistair said. He gave Carver one more tight squeeze and then pulled back. "You know, I used to wish I'd die young in some heroic way, but then I realized, if I don't live long enough to leave behind a legacy like the one Duncan left, what's the point in him dying and me living through?"

"I guess that's a way of looking at it." Carver drew his knees up and rested his forehead on them, the posture of a little boy who wanted to hide from the world. "Bethany always made everywhere she went a better place, because she was just so *good*. I'll never be that good."

"You can be," Alistair said. "If I can be as strong as somebody I lost, you can be as good as somebody you did." He sighed, tipping his head up to look at the stars. "I've done some... potentially very awful things in order to cheat death, after I decided I ought to live for him. I've gotta make those things worth it."

Carver couldn't imagine what, but it wasn't the time to ask. The horizon was starting to pale.

"Could you tell me more about Bethany, sometime?" Alistair asked. "The happy stories, not the sad ones. I'd... like to get to know her."

"Really? You barely know *me*."

"I'd like to get to know you, too, obviously," Alistair said, bumping his shoulder against Carver's. "I'll tell you about Duncan, maybe."

"Yeah," Carver agreed, realizing his breathing had finally slowed. "Yeah, I'd like to hear."

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

the most important part of a ship is the bonding over shared trauma.

NEXT UP: spicy times. because everybody wants Carver.



## 4. Chapter 4

### Summary for the Chapter:

Carver gets some private tutoring, meets someone very important and tries not to make a fool of himself, slips off with a girl at the Crown and Lion and tries not to make a fool of himself, gives Alistair some sort of *talk*, and has accompanying dreams after.

### Notes for the Chapter:

happy smut chapter everyone <3

This one isn't actually all that explicit. For that, we've got to wait 'til Zevran shows up ;)

Thank you as always to Icky for letting me borrow Will, especially so this chapter because Will Shenanigans become so very important here.

Will must have got word of Carver's apparently notable ability to sense magic, because she set him up for special training with Alistair.

"There's a whole camp of darkspawn emissaries set up in the Blackmarsh," Will had said. "I'd like to actually have a chance at taking some of them out before they hit us with entropy spells that put us straight in the ground."

Alistair, reportedly, had been a templar recruit before he was a Warden. From the sound of things, he was happy to be free of the templars, but he still knew how to fight like one, how to stopper magic before it became a dangerous spell. Carver, it seemed, had the aptitude to learn the same.

There was just the problem of needing a mage.

Velanna said she had better things to do than sit around and conjure wisps for them to dispel, and Will *definitely* had better things to do, so they ended up with a mage from Weisshaupt. Her name was Maura (although it might not've been spelled like Maura, but Carver didn't know better) and she was

a short, stocky Warden who always wore a very serious look that even her round face and button nose couldn't soften. She spoke mostly Ander and a bit of Orlesian, so she didn't put much effort into speaking with Carver, because Carver spoke neither Ander nor Orlesian.

Neither did Alistair, but Maura was particularly willing to put in the effort to communicate with him because she thought he was handsome.

She never said as much, but it was so obvious even a blind-drunk dwarf could see it. This was literal—Oghren elbowed Alistair in the kidney one day while they were standing around chatting, and once Alistair recovered from the force of Oghren's surprisingly sharp elbows, Oghren said, *"are you gonna show that pretty Ander girl what you can do with a sword, or are you wussing out because Hawke's got a bigger blade?"* The emphasis on 'sword' and 'blade' were enough that he really didn't need to accompany it with the lewd gestures, but try telling Oghren he couldn't do a lewd gesture.

Today, Maura had her long brown hair in a braid, one of those fancy ones, like Bethany always complained she couldn't do herself, because all her curls made it a mess to plait and her arms got sore before she'd finish. She taught Carver to do it for her, and he always did it whenever she asked. In secret, of course, because fourteen-year-old Carver was *not* about to let the population at large know that he braided his sister's hair.

Maura was talking to Alistair as they finished their daily lesson (Carver was not yet very good at dispelling the wisps, and on one occasion had made them bigger). The conversation was doing its general slow, plodding thing that happened when Alistair had to repeat himself because he talked too fast and she didn't speak his language well. Carver was only half-listening—there was a training dummy back here, and he was going a few rounds with it just because he was antsy and he wanted to stab something. He thought they might be talking about cheese.

Eventually, Maura left, and Alistair asked if Carver was coming with him to Will's office, so they could wedge their Commander up from her desk chair and take her to a place where there was something to eat. Carver put his sword away and followed.

"I know what Oghren said, but I'm not interested in her," Carver said.

"Mm? Oh, I don't take anything that Oghren says with much regard. I dunno why he was talking about Maura in the first place." They reached the main gate to the Keep, and Alistair waved at the guard.

"Well, it could be the fact that she is constantly flirting with you."

Alistair paused just inside the gate, and then wiggled his hands like he didn't exactly know what to do with them. "She is *not*."

Carver knew what somebody flirting with one of his friends looked like. It happened pretty much any time he went to the Hanged Man with Isabela, or the markets with Merrill, or anywhere with Garret, which was the *worst*. Given past experiences, he'd honestly been waiting for the day he showed up for training and neither of them were there, or they both showed up late and flushed and unrepentantly post-coital.

Isabela had done that at least six times.

"She is, though, isn't she?" Carver said. "I mean, you never see her smiling at me like that. She does her hair nicer when you're meeting with her. And she talks to you, even though she's quiet most of the time."

"There is no way." Alistair rubbed his nose, as if to hide he was blushing. "No way at all."

"That thing she calls you in Ander means 'sweetheart' or something like it."

"And how do you know *that*?"

He didn't know for sure, it was mostly the tone of voice that cued him into the fact that it was an endearment, but that bit seemed to have passed over Alistair's head. "I dunno, you pick things up living in the city."

Alistair's ears were bright red. "Well. That's. Something."

They were rounding the hall toward Will's office. "Look," Carver said, "if you like her, you ought to go for it, right?"

Alistair paused in his tracks. "Uh. No, I mean—yes. I mean, I don't really know how to talk to women?"

"He really doesn't." Will, who must have heard them chattering, emerged from her office and leaned against the doorframe, folding her arms. "Are you offering to help, Carver? Because he could really use the help. One time, there was this pirate in Denerim—"

*"We aren't talking about that,"* Alistair hissed.

Will shrugged one shoulder and tossed her hair. "Suit yourself. Now, were you here to talk about women outside my office, or is this more of your continued plot to get me to eat at appropriate times of day?"

"Hey, how did you know we were plotting?" Alistair said. "And yes. That's exactly what this is. We were going to take you for some lunch."

"As it happens, lunch is already on its way. Should be plenty for two more, they always give us four times the food we need when there's important guests."

She turned, and went back into her office, giving them no indication as to who else was waiting on lunch with her.

"Important guests?" Carver asked.

Alistair just made a vague noise of confusion and followed Will.

There was a woman sitting in Will's office. She was short and soft, with blond hair braided like a crown around her head, hands folded together in her lap. Her dress was absolutely elaborate, like something the Hightown ladies wore except even more heavily embroidered, and Carver thought he saw pearls sewn into the fabric in places.

Alistair, who'd stopped in his tracks, said, "hullo, Anora."

Oh.

The Queen of Ferelden was sitting in front of Carver.

— — —

The Queen, who Alistair and Will both addressed simply as '*Anora*', was as well-mannered as one would expect from her station, and very gracious as to ignore Carver's dropped jaw and general lack of manners. The sitting area adjacent to Will's office had a dining table in place of the usual couches, probably just for this occasion, and the Keep's staff brought extra place settings for the two of them. Carver sat directly across from the *fucking Queen* and tried not to make an absolute ass of himself.

Luckily, the Keep was not in possession of formal place settings at present, so Carver didn't have to figure out which fork to use, or anything like that. The food was better than usual, the conversation was pleasant, and Carver mostly just tried to keep quiet while Queen Anora expressed her disappointment that somebody she referred to as, '*your dear Leliana*' wasn't about.

It was all going fine, until Queen Anora's attention turned to Carver.

"You're Carver Hawke, then? Billie tells me you're her cousin," Queen Anora said, and Carver tried to hide the fact that her calling Will by the most casual of nicknames threw him for a fucking loop.

"Er. Yes. Second-cousin, I think. Our parents were cousins," Carver said. Will had ferreted that information out somewhere, and now the Keep at large knew and everybody joked about how he should've told her sooner and gotten more preferential treatment instead of taking so many rounds on Keep reconstruction.

"As I understand it, the Amells were once a very proud family. I hear the heir to their house is attempting to reinstate their nobility in Kirkwall."

The first new Carver had of his brother, and it came from the Queen.

"I wouldn't know, ma'am, I've been here," Carver said. (Was 'ma'am' the right thing to call the Queen? Should he have said 'your majesty'?)

Alistair was faring possibly worse than Carver. He kept bouncing his knee, which he did often enough when he was restless. It was easier to ignore when you weren't seated directly next to him and you weren't trying your best to be very well-mannered. Any higher, and he'd bump the underside of the table and make all the dishes rattle. Carver patted him on the knee, because if he noticed he was doing it, he'd stop.

"Have you been well, Alistair?" Anora asked.

"Oh, yeah, I've been fine. How's... ruling Ferelden?"

If Carver ever thought Alistair couldn't get any more awkward, he'd been dead wrong.

"You would know better than many that the kingdom has been in bad shape since the Blight. But rebuilding is going well, and I am glad to see Vigil's Keep is recovering also."

"We appreciate you taking the time to check in," Will said, casually leaning her arm on the back of Anora's chair. "Given how busy you are, your attention is truly a gift."

Anora turned her head toward Will, leaning in just a bit. "Would that I had the time to attend to you more often, Commander."

"Sooo," Alistair drawled, "are you going to be here a while, Anora?"

"Just the next few days," she said. "If I could stay longer, I would." This bit was addressed at Will, not Alistair.

"I'm sure the Keep's in a tizzy. Bet they weren't expecting a queen," Alistair said.

"Certainly, I wasn't expecting a queen," Carver said under his breath before he could stop himself.

Anora laughed, so she must not have been too bothered by Carver's offhand remark. "Truly, I need no special accommodation."

"Staying with Will, yeah?" Alistair said.

Will smirked. "Don't be silly, Alistair, of course we had a guest room made up for the Queen. The one across the hall from my quarters."

"Oh, right. Of course." Alistair cleared his throat, then set down his spoon, which he'd mostly been using to push around the broth at the bottom of his now-empty bowl of stewed vegetables. "We should... go. Leave you two to it."

"You needn't rush out on our accord," Anora said, with a gracious dip of her head.

"It's alright," Carver replied. "We were mostly here to make sure the Commander ate something."

"I appreciate it," Will said. "Thank you for the company, Carver. Alistair." Her fingers were running along Queen Anora's shoulder, right where the neckline of her gown ended.

Carver thought perhaps Alistair was right to leave the two of them some time alone.

They burst back into the hall, and when they were out of earshot, Carver finally let himself burst into laughter that was half-anxiety, half-humor.

"*Maker*," he said. "Is the Queen—?"

"Definitely going to spend the night in the Warden-Commander's bedchamber?" Alistair suggested. "Yeah. They're... something." He groaned, dragging a hand down his face. "They've been like this since they met, it's fine. Will's lover is in on it too, it's. Odd."

"I wasn't aware she had a lover," Carver said.

"Oh! Yeah! Leliana's great—she's a bard. I'd play you some of her songs, but I'm absolutely a *disaster* on the lute."

— — —

The Keep was absolutely abuzz while the Queen was in town, and it was the kind of royal-fuss-hubbub that made Carver's skin itch. He was grateful as anything when Sigrun found him lurking in his room, mentioned that the Crown and Lion wouldn't be busy since half of Amaranthine was battering down the Vigil's doors trying to get a glimpse of the Queen, and invited him along. It was just her, Alistair, and Carver—apparently, Velanna had hidden somewhere better than Carver, and Nathaniel was keeping an eye on the goings-on with that hawkishly observant stare.

True to her word, it wasn't busy. So empty, in fact, that the barmaid was bored enough to come join them at their table, sitting beside Carver and asking for stories of Warden exploits, and was the Queen *really* at the Keep?

Carver kept his answers brief, actually thought he was a bit brusque with it, but she didn't seem to mind. Instead, she pressed him, asking him where his biggest scar was, *and could he show it to her?*

Oh.

*She's an Isabela*, he realized.

This was the same sort of coyness that had Isabela asking Fenris the color of his underthings, or leaning over to pluck open Varric's shirt even further, claiming she needed to witness how far down the chest hair went.

He learned her name was Gwen. He asked her what exactly she was looking for out of all these Warden stories.

"Just a bit of fun," she said, with a grin that showed a dimple on her cheek.

"I guess there's no harm in a bit of fun," Carver said.

"Everybody needs some." In what was truly an Isabela-level move, she leaned in with both hands on Carver's thigh, her palms close enough together that her posture accentuated just how much her bodice didn't cover. "Especially, I think, tall, dark, handsome heroes who probably spend much more time fighting darkspawn than they spend doing anything *fun*."



He leaned in close enough that his nose brushed her cheek. "What sort of fun are you talking about, exactly?"

"Well, I can't have *too much*," she said. "I'm meant to be cleaning out the room at the end of the hall in a few minutes."

He would have taken this for a rejection, but she was still half in his lap, so he just said, "alright?"

"Boss won't mind if it takes a bit longer than usual. Meet me upstairs?"

"Oh. Yeah, in a moment, I—yes."

"You're cute," she said, and pressed a kiss to his cheek, making him turn a bright red that didn't fade until he finished his drink.

"Where're you headed, Carver?" Alistair asked him, as he set his cup on the table and stood.

The drink he'd just finished was his third, so he was tipsy enough to say, "to have some fun, so I hear," before sneaking up the stairs. Behind him, he heard Sigrun cackle.

If he'd still been questioning whether Gwen reminded him of somebody, he'd have landed on Isabela when she yanked him through the bedroom door, pressed him against it, and kissed him.

Carver hadn't ever kissed Isabela, he'd just thought about it extensively and balked when she flirted outright. This felt a lot like how he'd pictured it, though, except Gwen was quite tall for a girl, and Isabela came up to Carver's chest, so there wasn't as much leaning over to kiss her. Gwen might not appreciate that Carver was thinking of somebody else while they kissed, but he barely knew Gwen, and Isabela was somebody he'd befriended, mooned after, and maybe fantasized about once or twice.

Alright. *Definitely* fantasized about, and more than once or twice, but only because he knew Isabela would just take it as a compliment if ever she

developed the ability to read minds and found out Carver had gotten off thinking of her.

“Do you want—?” Carver began, but was cut off by her hand somewhere unexpectedly personal. Honestly, he’d just imagined they’d kiss for a while, but Gwen seemed to have further designs on him.

“I want this. Do you?” she asked, with a grin that he just had to kiss.

"Keep going." He certainly wasn't going to tell her to stop.

Carver wasn't exactly *lacking* for experience. His first had been back in Ostagar, when they'd all thought they might die and so most of them fucked and several of them got tattoos. The girl he'd been with was called Anna, and she laid him out on his back and fucked herself on him til she came, and then let him finish in her mouth. Then, he got the mabari tattooed on his shoulder.

Kirkwall wasn't exactly full of romantic prospects, but he'd met ladies in the Hanged Man and gone home with a few. There was that one Hightown widow with a thing for younger men...

Carver mostly knew what he was doing, was the point. Enough to predict she'd like it if he reversed their position, pressed her back against the door, and hiked up her skirts to get his hand underneath.

She'd been in the process of changing the bed linens and Carver certainly didn't intend on making her job any harder, so he didn't take her there. He pushed his fingers into her when she asked for it, pushed his cock into her when she asked for that, and kissed her so he had something to do with his mouth, because if there was one thing Carver didn't know what he was doing, it was dirty talk.

He pulled out when he got close, and she pushed her thighs tight together so he could fuck her there instead, and *that* was good, just as tight and almost as hot and already wet from her sex.

After he was spent, she tumbled to the floor with him, giggling a little, and he pulled her skirts up all the way so he could finish her off with his mouth. She called him a gentleman, and a sweetheart, and a *good boy*, and that last one was doing things to his cock, but he didn't exactly expect this to be something with a second round involved, so he let it lie.

When they were cleaned up with a towel from the basket of linens she brought up, flushed and sweaty and still laying on the floor, Carver looked at her, searching her face for any sign of discomfort. This didn't feel like a situation in which you'd make pillow talk afterwards, mostly for the lack of a pillow, but maybe she wanted something else? Maybe *he* did.

She just sat up, stretched, and said, "you know, you're better at that than most of the lads who come through here. Drop by again sometime, maybe?"

"We'll see," Carver said, feeling quite satisfied in certain ways but rather lacking in others.

She gave him one last kiss, on the cheek, just like the first one.

When he came downstairs, Sigrun raised her mug in his direction, and Alistair waved. They were truly sloshed, and didn't make any sort of comment when Carver slid back onto the bench beside them, his back against the wall.

He leaned up against Alistair's side— *that's* what was missing, Carver wanted to cuddle—and Alistair wrapped an arm around him and turned his head so his hot breath blew against Carver's hair.

"You were gone so *long*," Alistair complained. "Missed you."

Carver pressed closer, hoping Alistair didn't notice or mind that he was being used a little, because Carver was the sort of mushy prat who liked cuddles after sex.

Alistair just squeezed Carver a little tighter, patted his shoulder, and ordered Carver another drink.

— — —

Queen Anora was still at the keep the following day, but Carver wasn't. Will had either decided Carver had become proficient enough at dispelling magic (unlikely, he was unpredictable at best) or that the emissary problem was bad enough to warrant immediate action (probable) and sent them off to the Blackmarsh, a lonely place where the Veil was thin enough to give Carver constant shivers.

They camped at the edge of the marsh, Sigrun and Velanna in one tent and Alistair and Carver in another. Setting up the tents was a necessity, because there was a drizzle coming down and not enough shelter in the cliffs.

Wardens didn't keep watches. They could sense darkspawn coming, and if a common bandit or thug was stupid enough to disrupt a camp with Warden heraldry, they'd be in for a quick and unpleasant end. Still, Carver was awake and watchful, because he kept seeing green shadows out of the corner of his eye, and there was that awful prickling at the back of his neck that made him feel constantly as if something was coming after him.

"Carver."

He turned his head to find Alistair on his side, facing him. "What?"

"Sorry, did I wake you?"

He shook his head.

"I was just wondering... last night at the Crown and Lion, where exactly did you go off to? Sigrun said—" he sighed, tugging his blanket further up over his shoulder. "Never mind it."

"With Gwen?"

"Who?"

"Gwen, the girl at the inn, with the red hair. The one I went off with."

"Oh," Alistair said. "I didn't realize you went off *with* her. Well. I suppose that answers... I mean, I assume you didn't go to play a round of cards with her."

"Not exactly." Carver grinned, feeling a little terrible for it, like he was no more than one of the asshole mercenaries in the Hanged Man who traded stories of their so-called *conquests*, neglecting the parts where those women were probably only sleeping with them for pay.

Alistair chuckled. "Maker, would that I had your confidence," he said.

"That's ridiculous," Carver replied. "I barely have any confidence at all—*she* came up to *me*, else I never would've bedded her."

"Yeah, but." Alistair shifted a bit closer, so he could talk quieter, but Carver could still hear. "You know how you said Maura's... interested in me?" When Carver nodded, he continued. "Well, so, before we left today, I went to the mages' stockroom because Will sent me for lyrium, and we sort of got to talking, and then we sort of got to not-talking."

"How do you mean...?"

"She kissed me," Alistair said, all in a single rushed breath. "Like, really—yeah. Really just sort of went for it. And I sort of wanted *more than that*, maybe, but I didn't know how to... progress." He rolled onto his belly and propped himself up on his elbows, now fully engaged in talking rather than sleeping. "I've actually never asked a woman to..."

"Never asked a woman to what?" Carver pressed.

"Come on, you know what I'm talking about. Last time I equated it to something very silly, so please proceed as if I've said what I'm dancing around."

Carver turned onto his side to face Alistair. "No, I want to hear the silly thing. Never what?"

Alistair muttered something about a lamppost.

When Carver laughed loud enough that they could probably hear from the other tent, Alistair launched himself at him and tackled him, wrestling him until Carver slapped him on the shoulder and said, "alright! Alright, I yield. I'll stop laughing. Licked a lamppost in winter, *Maker*, you're ridiculous sometimes."

"That's me," Alistair said, letting him up. "Ridiculous. Also completely inexperienced in manners of love."

"Nothing's wrong with that," Carver said.

"You see, people always say that, but actually, responding with '*there's nothing wrong with being a virgin at your age*', it really sort of lends to the idea that you might think there's something wrong with it in the first place. Not that I'm a virgin. I have. Well. I don't know if it actually counts. Point being, it's not really the thing to say."

"Fair enough," Carver said.

"So, how do you?"

"What, how do you have sex with somebody? They really don't teach you anything in the Chantry, do they?"

"No, I bloody well know how it works, at least... with all the bits and such. I mean, how do you go from kissing to—" Alistair took a quick breath through his teeth, blew it out through his nose in a frustrated snort. "So, it's like, I'd be kissing her, and then start to, you know." He stuck out his index finger and lifted it slowly in a motion that was clearly meant to imply an erection (Carver, who had seen Alistair strip and jump in the river after a day's training, thought he should be holding up at *least* two. Probably three). "But I don't want to just. I mean. What if she doesn't want—?"

"Alistair," Carver sighed. "You could perhaps try *talking* with her."

"I mean, I *would*, if I knew how to do that without sounding like a complete tit about it. Trust me, I haven't a lot of good examples around. Zevran always seduces people with something flowery and Antivan, Oghren says

things that get him slapped, Will doesn't seem to say anything at all but always ends up with a pretty girl in her lap, and I'm pretty sure Nathaniel's only interested in gents."

"And you think *I'm* a grand example of a proper seductor?" Carver clarified, having never heard anything to that effect before.

"Sure, I mean, you always seem very polite to women, but they're interested in you, I mean, clearly, that girl was interested enough that you..." Alistair cleared his throat. "Absconded."

"Perhaps you should just say, '*Maura, would you like to abscond with me?*'" Carver suggested.

"Sure, that'll go over well."

"I mean... you just sort of ask. If you're going to be all twitchy about saying it outright—" (Alistair definitely was) "—you could say, '*want to come to bed with me?*' or something."

"But what if that's unclear? What if she thinks I'm just meaning something else?"

"If you've been kissing her long enough that you've got hard, I think she'll probably intuit your meaning," Carver said. "Maura's a Warden, anyhow. It's not like she's some innocent country lass, or, say, a Chantry sister."

"But what if, I dunno, she says, '*come to bed with you for what?*'"

"*Anything. What would you like me to do with you once we're there?*"

Alistair hummed, like he was considering whether this was a good response. It wasn't, really, Carver wasn't brilliant at this part, but he always figured if somebody wanted you, they wanted you. A bit of awkward back-and-forth deciding what exactly you both wanted wasn't gonna put them off. "But what if she asks *me* what *I* want to do?"

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't know, I just—what would you say? If somebody asked."

Carver had learned that Alistair was a bit older than him, almost by a year, but he looked rather young in this moment, worrying his lower lip between his teeth, his eyes so focused on Carver's. If it were any brighter, Carver would probably catch him blushing. Carver kept his voice deliberately steady, low, soft, like he really was talking to a lover. *"I'd like to fuck you."*

"Maker," Alistair breathed. "Alright, then, I. Wow. Well. Goodnight."

Then, before Carver could tease him anymore, Alistair pulled his blankets all the way up over his head, burrowed underneath them, and, ostensibly, went to sleep.

— — —

Carver's dream that night picked up at the conclusion of his and Alistair's conversation, but instead of the two of them in a tent in the Blackmarsh, they were in Carver's childhood bedroom. And, instead of stammering a goodnight in Carver's direction, Alistair responded to, *"I'd like to fuck you,"* with, *"I'd like if you fucked me."*

Things got more ludicrous and dreamlike from there. Suddenly all around them the walls of the house fell away, and they were in a serene meadow with a blue sky, but still crammed into Carver's childhood bed, but it didn't matter because Alistair was in Carver's lap, holding his hand curled into a fist so that Carver could fuck into his grasp, like how he touched himself when he was really engrossed in a fantasy.

Alistair didn't kiss him, in the dream, but Carver stared at the red, wet curve of Alistair's lip as he fucked his fist and then touched Alistair's cock and then—

He woke abruptly, but not violently. For that, he was glad. If he woke Alistair, he might as well have walked straight into the marsh and never returned out of shame.



## 5. Chapter 5

### Summary for the Chapter:

Carver fights several high-level darkspawn and manages not to pass out, fucks some things up in regard to Nathaniel, and meets one of the Warden-Commander's oldest friends.

### Notes for the Chapter:

Zev time bayBEE!

Carver woke plagued by dreams as usual, but thankfully, it was a variety of dream which didn't incite enough panic that Alistair was awoken by his hyperventilating. He *did* have to spend a lot of time focusing on something else so he stopped thinking about the warm press of a very different sort of nightmarish sleep, but thankfully the haunted fucking marsh he was in the middle of provided ample distraction.

Once the whispering green shivers of ghosts around him calmed him enough, he realized it was getting light outside. Better to get up, then.

Today, they were venturing into the heart of the Blackmarsh, to an abandoned manor and its surrounding farmstead, which apparently had been infested by darkspawn mages. That hadn't felt like a daunting task, but once he realized there was something so deeply *wrong* here, it was much more of a challenge.

There was one very obvious answer as to why the Blackmarsh felt so awful, and it was standing behind him with a staff and a scowl.

"Velanna," Carver said, still loath to talk to her about magical things after the implications of their last conversation. "What's all fucked up about the air, here?"

"You mean about the Veil?" she replied.

He shrugged. "I guess? I thought the Veil being thin means you can feel spirits, and I can sort of... it's just weird."

"The Veil isn't thin, it's torn." This was Sigrun, not Velanna. "Literally torn. You can see the rips in it, physically, if you go far enough that way. Will says they spit out demons, but I think she got them under control to some degree."

"In a very reductive sense, yes," Velanna said. "It would take a great deal of magic to stitch the Veil back together here, and Amell isn't keen on asking the Circle for help. If she's going to bring in whatever Warden mages and Dalish and apostates she can find, we'll need the darkspawn cleared out ahead of time."

So this was more important than just ridding the area of several powerful darkspawn. Carver didn't know what stitching the Veil would involve, exactly, but he'd bet it meant *a lot of mana*, which wasn't exactly something Will and whatever other mages were around would have in spades if they had to fight their way through darkspawn before making it to the tear in the Veil.

Carver decided pretty quick into the fighting that he *hated* emissaries.

They were strong enough that they didn't go down easily under a blade, not like human mages, and their magic itself was strong and it was slippery, like an oiled cord. It was hard enough to hold onto; Carver couldn't possibly bring it down. It just made his gut lurch like he'd been dropped from a height unexpectedly when he tried.

Alistair could dispel a few thing they tossed out, and Velanna knew spells that sucked out their mana, but still, they were tough, they took a long time to fight, and they could hit you with spells that felt like stinging insects burrowing into every inch of your skin.

Carver wanted to pass out by the time they were done with the first group, but they had two more to go.

Alistair frowned at Carver, crouching down beside him as Carver sat on an overturned barrel half-sunk into the mud. "You can sense them, right, but you can't split their spells?"

"Yeah. It's just—" Carver made a motion like something skating past him smoothly. "Just can't catch it." He was still a little out of breath from the fight. Those emissaries came with a *lot* of buddies.

"Right, okay. I have something that might help, but it's dangerous, so you don't have to try it." The bottle he pulled out of his pack was familiar. Blue, but pale, as if distilled. Some sort of lyrium solution.

Carver knew the taste of lyrium. The Hawkes had figured out pretty early on in their career as mercenaries that Garrett could basically funnel magic through Carver if he had a sip of it, lending Carver the ability to let loose some of Garrett's own spellpower from afar. It was a neat trick, even though it made him feel like his nerves were on fire. It had kept him alive. It probably would again.

"I can do that," Carver said. He didn't know the concentration of this potion—normally he just took a sip off the top of one of Garrett's—but he could hope Alistair, at least, had enough templar training to know what he was doing.

He swallowed it, wincing through the weird bright burn of it in his throat. Didn't go down smooth, lyrium.

Made the battle after smoother, though.

It was like the hurlock's magic was hanging lazily in midair instead of slipping through his fingers. Carver could grab it and pull, unspooling it and leaving the enemy without a single spell at their disposal. The magic wasn't like what Carver knew of Garrett's when he drank lyrium—a bright, sharp lash of electricity and fire and power. It was an oil-slick, a quicksand, a festering ichor that had the same blue-black pulse of the taint that echoed in Carver's own body.

When the darkspawn were all down, Alistair was staring at Carver with wide eyes and Velanna with narrowed ones. He could feel Velanna's magic still dissipating where she'd reduced one of the emissary's minions to a fine paste on the dirt floor. Her mana was deep and rough and dark and rich like the earth beneath a patch of moss or the silt at the edge of a riverbank.

"Well, that went better," Carver said.

"You—that wasn't dispelling." Alistair passed a cloth over his sword, wiping tainted blood off. "You were stopping them before there was anything to dispel. You were Silencing them."

"All in all," Velanna said, voice tight, "I think mages everywhere should be very glad you're not a templar."

There was a vehemence, an *anger* Carver couldn't get out of his voice as he turned to face her. "I would *never* do that to anybody but a darkspawn."

He expected her to get defensive because he got defensive, but Velanna's face softened, her mouth dropping open for a second before closing into a small smile. "Good," she said.

"You just made our job so much easier," Sigrun said. "All of us owe you a drink when we get back."

Alistair put a hand on his shoulder, leaning forward to take a curious look at his face. "You alright? No lingering odd feelings?"

"Fine," Carver said, standing up straighter, flexing his shoulders. "Just. Buzzy. Like I've got too much energy in me, even though I ought to be tired."

"Happens to me after a fight, too, whether or not there's lyrium involved," Alistair said. "Luckily, there's an easy solution—you've just gotta wear yourself out."

Sigrun wolf-whistled.

"Not like *that*. Maker. Let's just have a spar, if you want."

Carver grinned at him. "Sure you're not too tired out from the darkspawn? Sure you've got it in you to take me, Alistair?"

"Drop your blade and your armor," Alistair said, suddenly teasing back, confidence brewing in him. "The marsh isn't so marshy we can't wrestle, yeah?"

It wasn't, not in this area. The dirt on the ground was hard-packed, and the weather had been clear enough for long enough that it wasn't muddy. Carver agreed to the challenge, stripping down to his tunic as Alistair did the same, trying to keep himself from grinning broadly.

"You wanna take bets?" Sigrun said from the sidelines. Velanna only scoffed.

"Alright, then," Carver said. "Come at me."

The thing was, Carver was good at wrestling. For one, he had an older brother, and for many years, scuffling until one or the other of them was pinned to the ground was the primary way in which he and Garrett showed one another affection. Actually, it might've still been the primary way in which they showed affection.

But Carver had also been a rather belligerent boy, and from the age of about eleven to, well, *now*, he was more prone than most to picking fights, and occasionally beating somebody up. Listen. If village boys were going to go teasing Bethany, Carver was going to headbutt them. That's just how it went.

Alistair hadn't piqued his ire, but Carver knew what he was doing, and had not been raised in the chantry, where they probably told you never to tackle other boys to the ground, instead of just shrugging, saying, '*well, boys will be boys,*' and letting you squabble 'til somebody started bleeding. The other bit, Carver was realizing, was that he was just a hair taller than Alistair, just a tiny bit wider, just a few pounds heavier. Enough to pin him on his face in about twenty seconds.

"So, this isn't actually going to work if you go that easy on me," Carver said.

"Sod off!" Alistair shoved and bucked him off, then came at him again, but Carver caught his hands, pushing back. Alistair had better leverage, but Carver could dig his knee into Alistair's stomach and force him over, onto his back.

"Alistair, that's just embarrassing." Carver landed neatly on top of him, trying not to crush him, grasping his hands and pushing them over his head. He was starting to sweat, at least, and some of that built-up tension from the lyrium was easing.

Alistair laughed, his chest heaving underneath Carver's thighs, not trying to push him off just yet. His arms strained under Carver's grip. This... may have been a bad idea, considering Carver's dreams last night. But if there was one thing Carver didn't do, it was back down from something once he was in the middle of it. More in the habit of doubling down than backing down, Carver. He firmed his grip on Alistair's wrists.

"Alright, sure, you've got me, Hawke," Alistair said. "But I'm not working alone. Sigrun!"

Before Carver could react, a tiny but very forceful projectile hit him in the side and knocked him straight off Alistair.

Well. At least that solved the one problem.

— — —

Carver's next few weeks with the Wardens actually developed into some sort of a routine. The Keep was getting less busy—Stroud and the contingent from Orlais left the Keep in Will's hands, and then everybody out of Weisshaupt left as well, except for the sour-faced old woman who kept the treasury and was serving as sort of an accountant for the Keep.

This meant Alistair's chances with Maura (rather, Maura's chances with Alistair, as she was the one who'd been doing most of the active pursuit)

had been dashed, but Alistair didn't seem to mind. He'd been given a small group of new recruits to lead, mostly folk who'd joined up after the Blight and had been inspired by Will's heroic defeat of the Archdemon, and he was wandering around with them following him like a trail of ducklings.

Carver was technically one of those ducklings, but, being a bit more experienced, he was often pulled away by one of the others for quick away missions near the Keep.

He was trotting back from an errand for Velanna, trying to figure out where Alistair was today when he caught a hushed bit of a conversation happening down one of the corridors.

*"...resources to waste on something like this!"* It was Will's voice, in a low, angry hiss.

*"Something like this"? Really? He was your friend, too.*" That was Nathaniel, hoarse and bitter, quiet enough that Carver might not have heard him if he'd not heard Will first and stepped curiously closer. "I know you don't want to talk to the Circle," Nathaniel said, with his full voice and not a whisper, "but they'll have records. If an apostate of his description was killed by templars..."

"Do you really want to know that?" Will's voice had risen, too.

"Yes," Nathaniel said, raw, desperate. "I have to know. It's not just Anders we need to find."

There was a pause.

"We'll talk about it later."

"Fine," Nathaniel said, sounding deeply disappointed.

Carver continued onward before either of them caught him eavesdropping.

— — —

Carver had been in the bedchambers of a few of the other Wardens during his time. Nathaniel's room looked the most like Carver's: stark and undecorated except for his weapons and armor, laid with the same furniture that had been placed there by somebody else at some other point. (Alistair's room, on the other hand, was cluttered with every manner of thing, including several strange-looking figurines he kept on a shelf, and an enormous pillow for Will's dog).

"Hawke," said Nathaniel.

"Howe," said Carver.

They didn't talk much, him and Nathaniel. Nathaniel wasn't the chatty sort. And usually, Nathaniel's time was usurped by Will Business, which placed higher on the ladder of importance than Alistair Business, which is what Carver was usually involved in.

"To what do I owe this meeting?" Nathaniel asked. That was one of the funny things about him, he was never polite for the sake of politeness, but he would be formal for the sake of formality, so he came off grumpy but austere. He'd been sharpening a dagger, but he stopped, and stood up when Carver entered, tucking the blade back into a sheath at his belt.

Carver closed the door behind himself. "I overheard a conversation between you and Will earlier," he admitted. "About Anders."

Nathaniel said nothing, just looked at him dead-on and raised his brows.

"You're looking for him."

"I am."

Carver folded one hand over the other behind his back to keep from twisting them awkwardly. "You're afraid he's dead."

"Of course."

Carver now forgot all manner of anything he was supposed to say, any comfort he might be able to give.



Nathaniel sighed, pinching the bridge of his nose and then running his thumb and forefinger along the sweeping edges of the deep circles beneath his eyes. "If you're telling me you want to help, Carver, I appreciate it, but there's really nowhere to begin. Except maybe the Circle, and I'm sure you heard Will."

"I knew a mage once," Carver said. "A healer. Called Anders." He swallowed, worrying he was betraying the man's trust and ruining his life in one swoop. "He doesn't want the Wardens to ever find him. But I... I didn't want you to go about thinking he's dead."

Nathaniel took a quick step closer. "Where is he? How did you know him? How long ago did you meet?"

"I can't." Carver raised both hands in defense. "I can't tell you, I swore I would keep his secrets. I owe him my life, Nathaniel, I can't betray that trust. But... last I knew, he was alive."

"You don't understand," Nathaniel said. "Anders isn't the only person I'm looking for."

He did, all too well, but he bit his tongue. "I'm sorry I can't tell you more. I just... wanted to help."

"You *could* help," Nathaniel said, a deep frown on his face. "You are choosing not to."

— — —

Carver's original plans for the night had involved the Crown and Lion, but he was feeling a little adrift as he walked through the Keep, heading back to his room from Nathaniel's. Carver had seen Gwen again twice now, and she seemed to rather enjoy what they were doing, but she wasn't one to chat afterward. Or before, really. She wasn't much for chatting at all, and certainly she wouldn't be one for giving him advice.

Instead of going into town, he took trip down the hall, and knocked on Alistair's bedroom door.

"*One minute!*" Alistair called from inside, and then there was some shuffling around, and then the door opened.

Alistair's hair was wet, and he was just in a pair of soft, worn old trousers and nothing else.

"Didn't drag you out of the bath, did I?" Carver asked.

"The water had gone cold anyhow," Alistair said. "Come in? You look... Are you alright?"

Carver had been around a lot of fairly perceptive people in his time, and was also well-aware that he wore his feelings quite plainly. Being asked if he was alright normally rankled, except if it was Bethany, and, he was realizing, Alistair.

"I might have fucked something up," Carver said. "I wanted to ask your advice."

Making an admission and a request like this to anybody else would also have bothered Carver, especially if that somebody was Garrett or any of Garrett's friends. Alistair didn't shake his head, like, '*oh, Carver, what have you done now?*' and he didn't tease like, '*you didn't knock up some poor girl, did you?*' He just sat on the edge of his bed and patted the spot beside him so Carver could have a seat.

"What's on your mind? I'm not grand at advice, I'll warn you, but I'll do my best impression of Wynne. And you don't even know Wynne, so you'll just think I'm quite wise."

"I was talking to Nathaniel," Carver said, sitting beside Alistair, the cushiness of the mattress and his weight upon it making him sink toward Alistair.

"Oh, don't worry, then. Nathaniel always manages to make you feel like you've stepped in it, it's better once you get to know him and you can tell the difference between his baseline grumpy and an actual offense."

Carver's hands curled into fists on his knees. "No, I know I offended. It was something I said to him."

"What, pray tell? Did you insult his nose? I've never seen anybody try, but it seems like it could be a point of upset." Alistair nudged his shoulder against Carver's, like he was trying to get him to relax.

"No, it's—listen, I'll tell you as well, but you have to promise not to repeat it to Will."

"Carver..." Alistair began. "How bad is this secret, exactly?"

Carver said, "how badly do Wardens feel about deserters?"

Alistair's lips pressed together in a thin line. "Anders."

Carver was surprised Alistair came to that conclusion so easily, and wondered if Warden deserters were so few, even that brief of a description could lead somebody to Anders.

Alistair must have noticed his shock. "So, well. Will already knows."

"Stroud told her?" Carver said, repeating a thought he'd had early on and dismissed when Will didn't make any indication she'd known about Anders.

Alistair nodded. "I think she only told me. It was when she asked me to train you. She wanted me to try and... maybe learn what happened to Anders, from you."

Carver shifted away from Alistair, turning to face him. "She's had you *spying* for her this entire time—?" what would ordinarily have boiled into fury remained simmering under the surface, as Carver picked out something off about such an accusation. "But you haven't asked me anything about him. Not even anything about how I became a Warden, you just already knew what I'd told Will and you didn't press for details."

"Yeah. I didn't." Alistair's normally soft eyes were steely. "Because Stroud told her Anders had sworn him *and you* to secrecy, and he was only

reporting because the Commander of the Grey pried it out of him. We figured it was best not to pry anything out of you, and to let you tell us when you felt you could."

"So much chat about me behind my back," Carver scoffed. "And here I thought it'd been the Orlesians doing that sort of shit."

"Listen." Alistair set a hand on Carver's knee. "Your brother's a mage, right? If he up and disappeared all of a sudden, with only a bunch of corpses left behind, all of them ripped to shreds in a way you'd never even seen magic do, you'd be worried sick, wouldn't you?"

Carver was silent, because Alistair didn't need an answer to know that was true.

"Anders was one of Will's closest friends. They grew up in the same Circle. She saved him from certain death by conscripting him into the Wardens. And he wasn't exactly alone, when he vanished, so he's not the only Warden we're looking for," Alistair said.

Carver took in a deep breath. "What would Will do," he asked, "if she found Anders? If she found both of them?"

Alistair said, "she would make sure none of the other Wardens ever did."

"Really?"

"Will knows what it's like to be trapped somewhere, and so do I. And both of us understand that while being a Grey Warden is the right thing for us, it's not so for everybody. But it is a lifelong commitment—the others would want him to return here, to complete his duty, to be with us." Alistair took his hand back, folded into his lap. "As for the other Warden... if what we think has happened has, we don't want Weisshaupt to find out."

All Carver could say was a weak, "*oh*," that probably betrayed more than it should have.

"Even a Warden can't get by as an abomination," Alistair said.

"Well." Carver swallowed. "I understand your reasoning. And I'll talk to Will. But what the bloody hell am I to tell Nate?"

— — —

Carver did not need an answer to that question immediately, because Carver regularly saw Nathaniel was at the late-night dinners Will and her companions held. The timing of these, Carver had learned, was because Will worked so late into the night, they ended up eating whenever she was done. He had a day's worth of time to think of what to say, and he intended to use it.

He'd spoken to Will in her office, and had told her Anders ("and your *other* Warden") was in Kirkwall.

*"He's safe,"* Carver had said. *"He's with my brother, and there's nobody safer to be around in that damn city."*

Will explained the basics of what had gone on, and it sounded nasty. Carver, for one, could understand Anders feeling trapped, with the chantry sending a fucking *templar* to be recruited and refusing to take no for an answer. Will hadn't wanted to saddle Anders with a minder like that, especially not a templar, and had outright denied them on a number of occasions, but then she'd left for a brief stay in Denerim, and when she came back, there was a man who'd been initiated who bore more loyalty to the chantry than to the Wardens.

They'd not found the templar in one piece after Anders and Justice vanished.

Will also gave Carver something to put in his next letter to Garrett. Carver hadn't heard back from the first one, but now that he knew by way of the Queen that the heir to the Amell line was alive and in stirring things up in Kirkwall, he could send a second letter to the Amell estate, and be reasonably sure Gamlen wouldn't open it and steal the contents before Garrett got to it.

And Gamlen would definitely want to steal this. It was a ring, but all around its surface there were tiny etchings, not quite runes, just patterns, that were filled in with lyrium. It was so pure Carver could feel it even as it sat in his palm. It didn't belong to Anders, Will had said, which meant it must have belonged to Justice.

Despite how much of his day had been spent turning over a possible conversation in his head, Carver to dinner that evening without having worked out what he was going to say to Nathaniel. Anything but the truth made him feel slimy, not just because he had to lie (Carver had told plenty of lies in his time now) but because Nathaniel would probably catch him in it at some point. He was too observant, too clever to be lied to.

Alistair, who'd walked over with him, could certainly sense Carver's nervous energy, and gave him a friendly clasp to the shoulder before they entered. This was kind of him, but still didn't bring words to Carver's mouth.

This did not turn out to be an issue, because everyone's attention that night was on somebody else.

There was a man sitting atop the dining table. His legs were crossed, his hands fluttering as he sketched elaborate gestures with them, and Carver could hear the rise and fall of a voice telling a tall tale even as he approached from across the room.

Alistair laughed brightly and jogged the last few steps to the table, drawing the attention of the newcomer, who turned to face him, slipping off the table and meeting Alistair beside it, leaping directly into the air so Alistair could catch him and hold him tight.

"Nobody told me you were coming!" Alistair said, joy in his voice.

"If I informed many people of my whereabouts, I would be much worse at my job." The man's accent was Antivan, and he had the tanned complexion Carver expected of somebody from that far north, although his hair was very light blond. He was an elf, but the tattoos on his face weren't like any

Dalish ones Carver had ever seen. "And by that, I mean I would be dead. You know. On account of all the people after my head."

"It's a very nice head," Will said, from her usual place at the head of the table, feet kicked up, pipe in hand. "One understands why so many people would be so covetous of it."

The newcomer smiled, then kissed Alistair on both cheeks.

"I hate when you do that," Alistair said, scrubbing at the place he'd been kissed.

"But you turn so red. *Magnifico*. I have missed you so dearly, my friend Alistair."

Despite his earlier complaint, Alistair gave him another hug. "Missed you too, Zev."

When they separated, Zev's attention flickered to Carver. "We have a new fellow, it seems," said the man Carver had presumed was new, but in fact seemed to be a rather old friend, indeed. "Introduce me to your very tall, very *broad* friend, Alistair." His voice had dropped low, almost seductive.

"Zevran, this is Carver Hawke, one of the newest Wardens. Carver, this is Zevran, he's..."

"An enigma, wearing a very handsome face, and knives on hand to make him both dangerous *and* sexy," Zevran concluded his own introduction. "It is my pleasure to meet you, Carver Hawke. What an enchanting name. I do so love a man whose name makes you think of birds and blades."

Carver took a long moment to determine whether he was being played with.

Zevran seemed to notice, because he tossed his head back and laughed. "He is just like you, Alistair," he said. "Come now, aren't either of you at least *somewhat* accustomed to advances from a man?"

"I can safely say they are not," said Will. Showed what she knew—Carver had definitely been hit on by that elf at the Rose, but then again, he'd sort of shoved that off because the elf at the Rose hit on Garrett first. Everyone hit on Garrett first. If not Garrett, maybe Fenris or Isabela. Never Carver.

Maybe she was right. Maybe he wasn't accustomed to such things. Carver cleared his throat. "Well. It's a pleasure." He then tried very hard to break the awkwardness of the conversation, and approached the table instead of standing there still and stupefied.

"I can assure you, the pleasure is entirely my own," Zevran said, actually picking a chair rather than sitting atop the table, although he did sit sideways in it, his back resting against one arm and his legs kicked over the other.

"Is he always like this?" Carver whispered to Alistair, as they took their seats.

Oghren, who was very good at selectively listening and had picked now to have a good sense of hearing, said, "aye. Flirts with anything that moves. And some things that don't. Heard him sweet-talkin' a lock he was trying to pick once, as if that'd get it to budge."

"It is remarkable what a golden tongue like mine can do," Zevran said.

"'Silver tongue'," Alistair corrected him.

"No, my dear friend, I have better than a silver tongue." Then Zevran winked at Carver, of all people. "Now. If Oghren hasn't drunk all the wine, I'm sure we can eat and drink 'til we're all content, yes?"

"Are we waiting on any of the others?" Alistair asked, already fetching himself a plate. It was just leftovers from the kitchen tonight, but it was still quite an impressive spread. Breads and cheeses and fruits and cured meats, like the sort of thing meant to be picked at as an appetizer, but in enough quantity that it could be nothing but a meal.



"Not tonight, I don't think," Will said. So Carver wouldn't see Nathaniel today anyhow. "Carver, Zevran was one of my companions during the Blight. An invaluable asset, after he stopped trying to kill me."

"To be fair, I stopped trying to kill you almost right away," Zevran said, with the air of a tease, nudging the toe of his boot against Will's shoulder. "But ah, it does make a good story. Do you want to hear?" This was pointed at Carver, the only one who didn't already know Zevran.

"Sure?" Carver said, ready to listen to anything so long as he was eating. That was the strange thing about this new schedule of his, nights disrupted mid-way by a Warden-Commander who never slept. Now, he got hungry in the small hours of his own accord, as if his body expected him to eat then.

"You've done it now," Alistair said, leaning on the arm of Carver's chair and talking close enough that only Carver could hear. "Zevran's stories take quite some time."

Zevran made a sharp noise of annoyance and snapped his fingers in Alistair's direction. "Do not distract my captive audience!" he said, and Alistair raised his hands in surrender, settling back to watch Zevran chatter.

He did talk a long time, and by the end of it, Carver had learned Will was even crazier than he'd thought, bringing an assassin home like Garrett had once brought a particularly feisty kitten.

Seemed like it'd worked out better for her than for Garrett, at least.

## 6. Chapter 6

### Summary for the Chapter:

Carver gets to know the newest addition to Vigil's Keep, learns several secrets about his compatriots courtesy of a very drunk dwarf, and does some swordplay, then prepares for some *swordplay*.

### Notes for the Chapter:

ZEV IS HEATING THINGS UP BAYBEE

Zevran, it seemed, was functioning as a courier as well as what Carver understood to be a private assassin with loyalty to nobody but the Warden-Commander. Late into the night, he opened his satchel and handed Will an envelope that was far too thick to contain a single letter. It was sealed, but there was no stamp in the wax.

"From Leliana," Zevran said, which made Will hold it possessively against her chest. "And this—" another envelope, much thinner this time, "—is some information on our missing compatriot."

He waggled it in front of Alistair, who brushed the envelope aside. "No, thanks."

"As well as the child she was seen with."

"*Absolutely* not," Alistair said. He turned a slightly-panicked look toward Carver, who was having enough trouble following the trail of conversation and couldn't quite figure why Alistair was so worried.

Zevran relented, passing the envelope to Will. "It's sad," he said, "how something like that can so threaten a friendship. I used to imagine I'd never live another day without hearing Morrigan calling you a bastard, and then you calling her a witch..."

*Ex-girlfriend, maybe?* Carver thought. And then: *wait, did he say a child?*

Maybe an ex-girlfriend who had run off with another man and had his baby. Alistair had claimed he was 'not a virgin, not really, not sure if *that* counted', which could have meant any number of things but probably stopped short of him being a father.

"Thank you, Zevran," Will said, opening the second envelope and scanning its contents.

"Witches, man," Oghren said.

"*I'm* a witch," Will replied.

"Yeah, but you're not the sorta witch who goes after unsuspecting men." Oghren took another loud slurp of his wine and did not clarify anything about the sort of witch that *did*. Most of Oghren's conversations with Will (and with anyone) involved little clarification. Carver mostly relied on his intuition, and when that failed, his ability to dismiss anything Oghren said. "Not the kinda witch who goes after *any* men. Otherwise, it'd be mighty dangerous for your lady love to leave your here with all *these* handsome specimens."

Her eyes flicked up from the letter and curved with some amusement. "She might be a bit worried my affections will transfer to the next redhead in sight."

"Or one o' those elves. They're almost as pretty as ladies, almost as irresistible as me, and blondes are nice, too."

Zevran preened, tilting his head with no small degree of coquettishness.

"Velanna *is* a woman, Oghren," Will said.

"What, really? Learn a new thing every day," said Oghren, who was doing too much chuckling to make himself seem at all honestly confused, ruining what would have already been a poor joke.

Will folded the letter shut and slipped it back into its envelope, then set that on top of the one from Leliana. "Nothing you ought to be concerned about,

Alistair," she said.

Alistair, who'd been silent, sighed like he was deflating. "Good. That's good, then. I'll let you handle it." He pushed his chair back from the table, and picked up his plate. "I'll be on my way, then. I think that's too much excitement for the night."

Zevran slipped out of his chair in a manner that looked like he might be falling, until he was back on his feet with surprisingly catlike grace for somebody who'd had almost as much wine as Oghren. "I'll join you," he said. "You may show me to my room."

They walked out, Zevran linking his arm through Alistair's and bumping his shoulder affectionately. Alistair walked a little straighter after that, not so much hunched-over fretting.

Carver, in that moment, was struck with deep wanting, not to be in Zevran's place physically but to share that sort of space in Alistair's heart. To know him so well he could cheer him with so simple a gesture.

Carver, once they were out of earshot, turned to the head of the table and said, "who's Morrigan?"

"Another old friend," Will said. "She's also the reason Alistair and I are still alive. If you'll excuse me, I have some letters I need to read."

"Don't work through the night," Carver said.

"Trust me," Will wiggled the envelope in his direction, "this? Isn't work."

Once she was gone, Carver intended to follow, but stopped at an irritated groan from Oghren.

"It's stupid, the things they think they need'ta keep quiet so the new fella doesn't find out," Oghren said. "Here, lemme put it all on the table: Will uses her blood to cast spells sometimes, Alistair's the bastard son of some king of Ferelden, him and Morrigan disappeared into a room together the night before we fought the archdemon and now she's turned up with a kid

he doesn't wanna hear about, and Anders is probably possessed by a guy called Justice who used to walk around using a corpse as a suit. Pour that in your glass and chug it."

For a second, Carver thought he was tacking on some strange aphorism, but he was, in fact, passing Carver a flask, one of the many he seemed to have on his person at all times.

Stiffly, Carver reached out and dumped a hearty amount of whatever unidentifiable liquor was contained in the flask into his cup, then knocked it back. He needed a drink after all that.

"As for me, I'm an open book," Oghren said. "Well. Killed my wife that one time, but she'd wandered into the Deep Roads and went crazy, so it had to be done. You want another?"

"No need," Carver said. The one had been strong enough.

"Never marry a Paragon, kid."

"I don't think that's a worry."

Oghren raised his own flask as if to toast, then drank. Probably more than one should in a single gulp. "I'll give you one more for free: Zevran likes fellas like you."

The liquor was already making Carver's head fuzzy, and the wine he'd drunk beforehand wasn't helping. Or, it was helping, but on the liquor's side. "What?"

"You know how to bugger a man, Hawke? Eh, nevermind. Zevran'll teach you if you wanna know."

Carver needed to go to bed before Oghren's series of revelations and beverages made him pass out at the table.

— — —

Carver went straight to Alistair's room the next morning, because Alistair was at the center of most of the surprises that came out of Oghren's mouth. Of course, Carver hadn't known Will was a blood mage, but one of his closest friends was a blood mage, and Merrill had proven time and again that it wasn't something Carver fully understood. Everything about Anders was old information, except that Justice had once inhabited a corpse, which must have been even creepier than that blue glow and booming voice coming from Anders' chest.

But Alistair...

Carver only got bare scraps of secondhand news from Ferelden, but he remembered some guard recruits who'd come in from the south mentioning that somebody had found some long-lost bastard son of King Cailan's, and was trying to put him on the throne. Given Anora's coronation, that hadn't happened, and nobody seemed to care about a lost prince anymore, least of all Carver. It was baffling to think that might be Alistair.

He intended to barge right in and ask, but somebody was walking out of Alistair's room as he approached. It was Zevran, smiling widely enough that the corners of his eyes wrinkled, and readjusting cuffs on a dark blue shirt that was unlaced all the way to his stomach.

"Good morning, Carver Hawke," Zevran said. "If you are here for Alistair, it seems you are too late, he is already gone."

"Ah," Carver said, his mind working that over. "So, did he say where he was going when he got up this morning?"

"When he—" Zevran paused, and then laughed, pressing a hand to Carver's arm as if to steady himself. "No, no, my dear Warden, I did not spend my night here."

"Didn't you?"

Zevran squeezed his forearm, then pulled back. "I did not. Alistair turned me down a long time ago, and while I may flirt, I do not press."

"I just thought—since you're not completely dressed..."

Zevran played with the end of the tie on his shirt, looping it around his forefinger. "I am not completely dressed, no. I'm pleased you've noticed, I intend to stay this way. There is a very handsome young Warden wandering around here, whose name reminds me of birds and blades."

"Um," Carver said.

"I was waiting on such a gentleman to escort me to wherever they serve breakfast in this place," Zevran said. "Care to show me the way?"

"I believe you know the way already," Carver said. "It's the same room we ate in last night."

"You have caught me," Zevran said, giving him a short bow that made his shirt gape open and show even more bare, smooth skin. "I simply have want of your company. As a matter of fact, I was poking around Alistair's to find where *you* might be."

Carver was struck with an abrupt realization that Oghren may have been right about something. "Er, alright, then."

Zevran looped his arm through Carver's like he had Alistair's the previous night, but Carver, too startled to even think about leaning into the touch, froze stiff.

"Tense, are you not?" Zevran said, although he did not let go. "If you are bothered by my close proximity, you need only say. Antivans are a rather handsy bunch, myself foremost among them in that regard."

"It's not as if I'm bothered by being touched," Carver said, remembering to start walking. He had friends who were sort of touchy-feely. Isabela was always putting her hands wherever she wanted, sometimes sitting on his lap when there wasn't another chair because she said he was as sturdy as any of the furniture in the Hanged Man. Merrill hugged him every time she saw him, even if he was covered in blood from a fight. Even if *she* was covered in blood, too. "I suppose it's usually girls I know who are like that." Varric

and Garrett would both clap you on the back whenever they walked past, but they weren't for hugs or walking arm in arm.

"There are some Fereldens who find Antivan men distinctly feminine," Zevran said. "I cannot see it, but I am speaking from the point of view of someone who was born in Antiva, you understand."

"And what do Antivans think of Ferelden men?" Carver asked, shortening his step more than usual to match Zevran's pace.

"You pose the right questions! Many think they are boorish, or lack any particular sort of style or grace."

"And what do *you* think?"

Zevran looked at him with a grin that said Carver was still asking the right questions. "Style is overrated; you have been nothing but polite; and as for gracefulness, I think I would have to see you dance or fight to know. Which would you prefer?"

Maker. If Isabela and Merrill could work Carver into knots around his own tongue, this man was *unraveling* him. "Fighting," he said. "Definitely fighting."

"Then we shall spar later," Zevran decided. "I prefer a dagger, but I'm not out of practice with a saber. You, on the other hand..." His hand slipped up and he squeezed Carver's bicep. "You seem like you go for something a little weightier."

— — —

Zevran, in keeping with his word, asked Carver for a spar later that day. Carver, having planned to use his free time for a conversation that wouldn't happen (he'd learned Nathaniel was on a mission with Sigrun and Velanna until the evening) agreed.

Carver didn't have his usual two-hander, because Zevran fought with a rapier, and asked that Carver do the same. "*It is only fair*," he'd said. The



blade was even slimmer than the dull practice sword he'd used in his first spar with Alistair, only the tip sharp enough to puncture, although it wouldn't get through the padded gambeson of his armor without force. Zevran had put on armor of his own, all done up in black leather that gleamed in the sun. Carver could spot the gaps in it where a plunging blade would be dangerous, but this was a spar, not a fight.

"Are you quite ready for me?" Zevran asked, putting back his hair in a practiced motion, sweeping all that long, silky blond into a tie at the back of his head.

"I am," Carver replied.

"Good."

Zevran moved like a whip-crack.

He was here and then he was somewhere else, behind and before Carver, and although he struck more at Carver's blade than his body, it was clear that he was *dangerous*. Carver didn't do much fighting against rogues. He'd have to ask Sigrun for pointers later.

It was like trying to fend off a whirlwind with a butter knife. Had Carver his usual sword, he would have been able to guard with big swats of the blade, but in order to fight with a rapier, he needed to learn to *dodge*. And he needed to learn fast.

Carver made a few fumbling twists away from Zevran's saber, but eventually Zevran passed through his guard with ease. He stopped Carver short with his blade at Carver's throat, the pointed end lifting his chin. For such a short man, Zevran was practically towering. Carver swallowed, and the tip of the rapier bobbed.

"My win, I think," Zevran said, his smile sharp as his swordpoint.

"Alright," Carver replied. His eyes skirted past Zevran to Alistair, who'd stopped his own training to focus on Carver, although he looked away when

Carver caught him at it. At least he was decent enough to pretend he hadn't been watching his friend kick Carver's arse.

"Want me to show you how it works?" Zevran asked. "I'm told I'm a remarkable tutor in the art of the duel."

"Yeah," Carver said. "I suppose I ought to know."

"Good, yes. Then, if you don't mind," Zevran returned his rapier to its sheath, "I'd like to position you, yes? May I touch?"

"Yes?" Carver said, and Zevran circled around him.

He didn't expect the first touch to be right at his hips.

"Carver," Zevran said, his voice a soft croon, "do you jump like this because you don't like it, or because you like it too much?"

"Zevran," Carver began.

"Never mind, we'll talk about that later. Angle your hips this way, yes, and your elbow should be more like..."

Zevran moved on to adjust various bits of Carver's form, and Carver, once again, caught Alistair staring. Carver supposed he looked silly, such a large man with such a little sword, with an elf half his size darting around him and making him blush with every minor adjustment to his form.

Zevran *was* a good teacher, though. When he was done flirting, he could really put you through your paces.

— — —

They trained until the sun went down, and then they adjourned for dinner, where Will was finally in attendance at a reasonable hour.

With the bulk of the Wardens returned from the day's duties and everyone in the Keep cropping up to meet this new, mysterious guest, dinner was a raucous affair that involved a lot of Carver's fellows slapping him on the

shoulder and congratulating him on a magnificently lost duel. Sigrun said she was sorry she missed it, and Velanna nodded like she agreed. Nathaniel was at Will's side the entire time, sticking to her like a shadow as he so often did, and Carver had the feeling that he was once again going to have to defer anything he wanted to say to him until a later time.

After they ate, most of what Carver thought of as 'The Warden-Commander's Inner Circle' adjourned to a sitting room where they could more comfortably share drinks and stories. Sigrun was detailing the day's scouting mission—the Wardens were combing the Deep Roads for any signs of more broodmothers, to cut off future darkspawn reproduction at its source.

Carver stretched, rotating his shoulders to alleviate some soreness. Zevran's training had required new use for muscle he ordinarily put to different motions, and doing it all day had him stiff and achy.

"Alright? You didn't pull something training with him, did you?" Alistair said. "Sometimes, Zev doesn't understand that not everybody's as flexible as he is."

"He just worked me hard," Carver said, repeating the motion and finding that it was easier, but not by much. Maybe he just needed rest.

"A hot bath would probably do you some good," Alistair said. "If you look pitiful enough, you might even be able to get Velanna or Will to toss some magic at it and heat it up for you, so you wouldn't have to worry about a fire."

"True enough." Zevran, who had this unnerving habit of popping up wherever you least expected him, appeared at Carver's side. "But I think there's a more direct application that could help. Come, pretty bird, sit with me."

"What in the world have you taken to calling me?" Carver muttered.

"Only what you are, Hawke." Zevran dropped one of the cushions off the couch and instructed Carver to sit there, placing himself behind, with his

knees framing Carver's shoulders.

Carver had the express feeling he might be doing something ridiculous, but Zevran simply put his hands on Carver's shoulders, giving him a firm squeeze. "Are you... planning on giving me a massage?" Carver asked. "Is that how you woo all the lads, then?"

"Only the ones I work hard," Zevran said, repeating Carver's offhand remark with undue lasciviousness. He dug his thumbs in on either side, at the join of Carver's neck and shoulder, and smoothed downward. "I cannot do much like this, I'm afraid, but I can ease some of that tension. We can work the rest out in my room, later."

He was speaking quietly enough and leaning close enough that only Carver could hear him. Without much distance interposed, Carver could smell a rich, spicy sort of perfume that clung to Zevran's skin. "Is that a come-on?" Carver asked, just as quiet.

"Would you like it to be?" Zevran's warm hands swept down his shoulders and back up, digging in where his muscles had knotted from strain.

"I don't know," Carver replied, honestly.

"Then come to my room after all this dies down." Zevran's fingernails dug in this time, traveling all the way up Carver's scalp, making him shiver. "We'll decide what you'd like it to be once you don't have worry of eyes on you, yes?"

"Alright," Carver agreed.

"Good man."

It was close enough to *'good boy'*, which Gwen, who was possessed of a sharp mind and who watched Carver very closely, had noticed got him off. It made Carver shiver just like Zevran's nails dragging against his skin did.

Zevran patted him on the shoulder. "Now, beyond that, there's not much more I can do unless you want to take off your clothes." This, he said loud

enough that the room at large heard, which meant it got a couple of laughs, and made Carver turn red.

Carver scurried away to find himself a drink, and when he returned, he found Alistair had commandeered his cushion on the floor, having shifted it a little to the side so that he wasn't between Zevran's legs. Carver, instead, sat on the couch on Alistair's other side, bumping him in the shoulder with his knee. "You stole my seat."

"I figured it'd be more comfortable up there." Alistair leaned his head back. "I like sitting on the floor sometimes. Besides, Turnip will come give me cuddles if I'm down here. C'mere, Turnip!"

The mabari trotted over and laid beside Alistair, its head in his lap, Alistair petting its ears. "It is a good thing you remained with the Grey Wardens," Zevran said. "I would hate to see the tears that would come if you'd been parted from that slobbery hound."

"Did you know, Will let me take him with me on the thaw hunts?" Alistair said. "He's saved my life as many times as you have."

"I did not say he was not a noble and brave beast," Zevran said. "Simply that he is also very fond of drooling all over my clothes. Which are often leather. Do you know how difficult it is to scrub mabari drool out of leather?"

"My brother's mabari ate a boot, once—didn't just chew it up, he *ate* it. Swallowed it."

Alistair laughed, reaching up to pat Carver on the knee. "It was your boot, wasn't it?"

"Of *course* it was."

Alistair continued cackling, Carver shoved at him, and his heart rate slowed, at least for a moment, at least until he thought again of what might lay in store for him later that night.

## 7. Chapter 7

### Summary for the Chapter:

Carver has an exciting night with Zevran, and then an even more exciting night with Alistair. (These evenings are exciting in two very different ways.)

### Notes for the Chapter:

alright alright it is time to pull out the REAL SMUT  
HEYAAAAAAAAAAAA

Enjoy Zev time

Zevran had one of the smaller guest rooms, but it was positioned so that, if you were so enterprising, you could open the window and take a leap over to the battlements. Carver had no doubt Zevran was using that method to sneak around the Keep, not because he *had* to, but for his own amusement.

Zevran really did give him a massage. He had Carver take off his shirt but not his trousers (but he *did* remove his boots, because if you were lying on somebody's bed, you took off your boots, it was only proper) and he rubbed Carver down with some kind of oil and with the easy sensuality he seemed to exude constantly. Carver, for his part, didn't really respond much, except to mumble his thanks when Zevran said he liked his tattoo. It was soothing, feeling this much of someone's hands pass over your body, especially after a long day that left you sore.

Then, Zevran straddled Carver's lower back and used his new positioning and added leverage to lean his full weight onto Carver and *bloody Maker*, that *hurt*. But every time the pressure let up, there was an overwhelming sense of relief, and his muscles were loose and lax in Zevran's wake.

"It doesn't hurt too much, does it?" Zevran asked, pressing particularly hard on the line of Carver's shoulder, right over the mabari inked on his shoulder

blade. He was asking, because Carver had made a low noise that was partly pain, but also partly *not*. The oil helped, he thought. Made it smoother.

"Had worse," Carver said. "Where'd you learn to do this?"

"An Antivan whorehouse," Zevran said, leaning close enough that his breath puffed against the back of Carver's neck and his unbound hair tickled along Carver's spine.

"You'd think it'd feel a little—ah—nicer, then."

"Not everything in such a place is about sensuality. There is healing that goes on there, too, and simple companionship." He spoke as if he had more experience with the place than Carver expected, but Carver didn't feel he had the room to comment. "But if you want me to make it feel *nicer*..."

"This actually seems to be helping more, though," Carver said. "Even if—ngh—it sort of hurts."

"Has anyone ever told you," Zevran said, close enough to whisper, "that you make very pretty noises, even when it sort of hurts?"

"Can't say so."

"Oh! Then I am glad to be the first."

Even though Carver had said he didn't mind the pain, the massage didn't last much longer. Zevran gave his attention to the sides of Carver's spine, where the twisting movements of fighting with a rapier made him ache, digging in with his knuckles.

Zevran's hands swept over him a last time, without the pressure of his full bodyweight behind them, just to touch him. He squeezed the back of Carver's neck gently. "I'm all done, pretty bird, you can get up."

"Oh," Carver said.

"Is that disappointment I hear? Were you expecting me to keep going?" Zevran asked.

"You said... I thought we might..." Maker, he was as bad as Alistair. He rolled over and sat up, his body feeling weightless without the pressure Zevran put on it.

"Did you want something more, perhaps?" Zevran put his fingertip beneath Carver's chin, lifting it the same way he'd done with his swordpoint. "Not everything *must* be about sensuality, but things *can* be, if that is your desire. It is mine, that much is for certain."

"Is it?" Carver breathed, even stiller than he had been when there was a blade at his throat.

Zevran's finger traced down his jaw, along the bob of Carver's throat as he swallowed, and came to rest in his collarbone. "I am not in the habit of bringing handsome young men back to my room *without* the intent to seduce them."

"I'm not in the habit of... being seduced by handsome men. And by that, I mean, well. Never."

"Because you don't find yourself attracted to them?"

Carver nearly rolled his eyes. "Because I often walk around with six feet of distraction and charm who flirts with every man he sees."

"You can't be talking about Alistair. I can't imagine he's changed *that* much."

"No, it's Garrett—my brother—I mean, Alistair's not interested in men, right?"

Zevran's eyes caught his and held. "I wouldn't be so sure. Perhaps he hasn't considered it, just as you had not."

Carver was the first to look away, when embarrassment averted eye contact challenging. "I bloody well am considering it now."

"And what, pray tell, are you considering?" Zevran cupped Carver's cheek. The intimacy he'd developed when he was gently touching Carver's neck



turned into something sweeter here, something softer.

"I'm considering letting you seduce me."

Carver felt more than heard the little puff of a laugh. "As if I had not been seducing you since I first arrived," Zevran said. "As if your mind has any say on whether your body is attracted to mine. I do not need to seduce you, that much is done. You need to consider what you're going to do about it."

Carver, more prone to action than to words, kissed him.

Zevran returned his affections with a pleased noise in his throat, the hand on Carver's cheek slipping behind his neck to hold onto him there. Carver reached for Zevran's waist—he'd not been blind to the way Zevran's fitted trousers and billowing shirt made his waist look especially trim—and Zevran pulled back, tongue flashing to lick his lower lip.

"Hold me tighter than that, lovely, you don't want me slipping away, do you?"

He absolutely did not. He squeezed Zevran's waist tighter, hands digging into smooth fabric Zevran struck as quick as he had with his sword, practically launching himself at Carver, fitting himself astride Carver's lap and slinging his arms around Carver's shoulders as he tipped his head for another kiss.

It started off as the sort of kiss you read about in storybooks, firm enough to make his stomach swoop, and then it turned into the sort of kiss you read about in very *different* books, like the paperback novels that Merrill kept procuring from somewhere in Lowtown wherein somebody was always being *ravished* and everybody's breasts were always heaving.

Carver supposed in this scenario, he was the one being ravished.

He didn't think he minded.

Zevran pushed at Carver's shoulders and Carver didn't fight it, lying on his back and letting Zevran's hands roam. "Look how beautiful you are," he

said, his hands gentle as he massaged the muscle that overlaid Carver's ribs. "You blush down to here." He kissed a spot on Carver's sternum to indicate.

His palms came back up over Carver's chest, squeezing a little, like the way you'd touch a woman. A younger Carver, defensive over his masculinity, might not have liked that bit, but *fuck*, if a man squeezing his tits felt this good, Carver wasn't gonna complain.

"How do you like things in bed, birdie?" Zevran asked him, squeezing again and then *pinching*, and *oh*, that sharp pain only made him push his hips up under the wide splay of Zevran's thighs.

"I... don't know. I mean, I know what to do with a *woman*, but—"

From the feeling of Zevran's cock pressing against Carver's belly, Zevran manifestly *wasn't* shaped like the women Carver was used to.

"That is what I meant," Zevran said. "It isn't as if things are so different. Tell me what pleases you."

"I..." Carver swallowed, and Zevran's fingers fluttered over the bob of his throat again. "They usually like it when I use my strength against them, you know, press them against a wall or pin them down."

"Well and good— *very* good—but you'll find I did not ask what your partners preferred, but what *you* do."

"Oh. Right." Carver, wondering if it was even possible, felt like his cheeks were getting even redder and hotter. "I like... using my mouth."

"Usually," Zevran said, his thumb passing over Carver's lips, "the first time with a man, most men will ask *not* to suck a cock."

Carver, because he thought he probably could, traced the outline of Zevran's cock in his trousers. "You asked what I like," he said. "I like fucking somebody, too, it's just—I dunno."

“You can simply say you like to have something filling your mouth, it is not uncommon.”

“Then, I like that.”

Zevran moved in one slow, sinuous rock backward, so Carver’s cock pressed against his ass. “I think, to start, a little less clothing, yes?”

Having already been looking more than he should have at the bared flash of skin down Zevran’s chest, Carver certainly agreed.

Zevran stripped without much showiness to it, although the way he moved made everything look finessed. Carver was certain he didn’t look half as good wiggling out of his trousers, but by that point Zevran was off the bed and rummaging around in his cloak for a little tin, which he dropped on the duvet next to Carver.

Zevran gave Carver a look that could only be described as devouring him with his eyes, and then a kiss which could only be described as fucking Carver’s mouth with his tongue.

“Let me show you how to fuck me,” Zevran said, after Carver was done feeling thoroughly ravished, indeed. He was so fucking hard and Zevran’s thigh was right against his cock.

“Yeah, just. Tell me what to do and I’ll do it.”

“Will you, now?” Zevran asked, his slim fingers loosening the lid on the tin.

“Anything,” Carver said.

“Dangerous to give me something like that, pretty bird. To offer me whatever I want. I can want so much, you understand.”

Carver repeated, “*anything*,” because he was so fucking hot and Zevran was so fucking gorgeous, Carver really would take whatever Zevran gave him.

He couldn't help feeling like Zevran was going easy. He went slow, showed Carver how to open him up and fuck him, corrected the clumsy movements of Carver's fingers until Carver figured it out, just like Zevran had taught him to hold a rapier with that silly basket hilt.

"You learn fast, hm?" Zevran looked like some sort of prince above him, one hand pressed against Carver's chest, twisting his hips as he moved back against Carver's fingers.

"I've a good teacher," Carver said, because it sounded like the right thing.

It was. Zevran smiled, leaned forward to kiss him. Carver kept fucking him, not sure what he was meant to do next—the angle on his wrist wasn't great but it wasn't too dissimilar to fingering a woman. Felt tighter, though. And it wouldn't have been slick, but for the oil Zevran used.

"This isn't gonna hurt, is it?" Carver asked.

"I'm far too acquainted with the sensation for that, my dear man," Zevran said. "You *are* very large, though. If you were doing this sort of thing with somebody less experienced, I'd suggest more of this, but—" he tugged at Carver's wrist, encouraging Carver to slip his fingers free, "—I'd *really* like your cock now."

"How do you want me?" Carver said, knowing how desperately eager he probably sounded.

"Just like this. Let me work, yes?"

"Anything," Carver said, again.

Carver didn't fuck Zevran. Zevran fucked *himself*, and used Carver's cock to do it. Carver was helpless underneath him, in a way he discovered he liked, turned into a toy for him. He ran his hands over Zevran's thighs and felt them flex as he moved, doing as he pleased.

And what he pleased, it seemed, was getting Carver off.

*“Fuck.”* Carver grasped Zevran’s hips, trying to get his warning past his lips. “I’m close, Zev—“

“I know,” Zevran said. “Polite of you to warn me, but I’d rather see your face when you come inside.”

*Fuck.*

*He just.*

*He couldn’t.*

*Fuck.*

He was groaning and thrusting up into Zevran and coming and *oh*, it was brilliant. It was turning everything into his mind to blank, overwhelming heat.

Zevran pulled off him and gave him ample time to recover, laying by his side and running his fingers over his chest. Carver could still feel Zevran hard against his thigh, but he wasn’t doing anything about it, just murmuring something inaudible and Antivan besides, giving Carver little kisses on his neck and shoulder.

When Carver was finally steadied, Zevran said, “did you still want to learn how to use your mouth on me?”

Maker, did he.

They reversed their positioning a bit, Zevran sitting at the head of the bed with Carver lying between his legs, leaning on his thigh as Zevran slowly touched himself and, with no hesitation or shame whatsoever, provided Carver with a lengthy explanation of the finer points of cocksucking.

Carver *did* like to have something in his mouth, and thought he was pretty good at it, besides. Zevran tasted good, not the same as a woman, but good. And he talked Carver through it the whole time, petting his hair and his shoulders, gentling him but gasping all the while whenever Carver managed to do something he really liked.

Eventually, Carver's jaw got sore. Zevran had him pull off, then, asked Carver to stroke his cock and lick him. When Zevran came, he grasped Carver's chin and pulled him back and away, letting Carver stroke him through it but keeping it out of his mouth.

Not off him entirely, though. There was a streak of come across his cheek, and more on his knuckles.

"You *are* good at that," Zevran said. "I apologize for manhandling you, but I found myself without time to warn you, and it's best not to have somebody come in your mouth without expecting it, the first time." His thumb wiped up the bit on Carver's cheek, and Carver was a little surprised to watch him lick it clean.

He tried the same, on his fingers. "It doesn't taste bad," he said.

"Of course not, I do not think people would do this so often if it did. There's something to be said for acquired tastes, though. I've known people to hate it. Spit it out and rinse their mouths with water infused with mint, after. But I've also known people to hate Antivan coffee, which is one of the most exquisite tastes I can imagine."

"Never had it," Carver said, dropping his head down, using Zevran's thigh as a pillow.

"Fereldens are fond of tea," Zevran said. "But I like something a little bolder."

"You like a lot of things a little bolder," Carver said, which didn't really make sense, but Zevran was playing with his hair, and Carver was far too thoroughly exhausted to think of anything that *was* reasonable.

— — —

Carver, luckily, had the following morning free of duties, and so he walked back to his own room just before dawn and went right back to sleep. Sometimes, it was a blessing to have a commander who was a night owl,

because mornings at Vigil's Keep tended to be slow affairs, without much important going on.

Ser Pounce-a-lot had been sleeping right in the center of the bed when Carver arrived. He was willing to be scooted over, even though he did give a soft, slightly irritable "*mrrow?*" at the treatment.

Carver wasn't quite sure how long he slept, but nobody pounded on his door to wake him. There was a knock eventually, but it was after he'd dressed in his under-layer, washed up, and stretched (to find that there was almost no lingering soreness—Zevran's hands really were quite good).

"*Carver?*" It was Alistair on the other side of the door.

"Yeah, come in," Carver called back. The door creaked when it opened, and Ser Pounce-a-lot skittered out of the room, off to terrorize some local mice or entreat some tibits from the kitchen staff.

Alistair's eyes were unmistakably lingering on Carver's chest, what showed past the undone collar of his shirt.

Carver could hazard a guess, but he was reassured that Alistair was *definitely* looking at the marks from last night when Alistair said, "so, is it true you and Zevran slept together, then?"

Maybe Carver was grumpy because he'd just woken, maybe he didn't like Alistair's staring, or *maybe* it was the slight accusation in Alistair's voice. Probably that one, actually. Carver should've kept his retort to something that wasn't, "is it true that your dad's the king of Ferelden?" but apparently he hadn't quite outgrown his habit of confrontation when embarrassed.

Alistair's eyes widened for just a second, and then his arms folded and his mouth pressed together. "Yes," he said. "Or, he was. He's dead."

"Right. Were you going to tell me?"

"Probably not—listen, I don't like talking about it. I renounced my claim to the throne, I never actually knew my father, and I'd probably be better off if

nobody else ever knew who he was, either." Alistair sighed, lifting one hand to dig his thumb against the bridge of his nose. "Duncan was more a father to me than anybody else was," he said. "That's all that matters."

There was more pain in his voice than Carver expected. "Oh. I'm sorry. I shouldn't've—Oghren told me, and I just wanted to know." He did up the collar of his shirt so Alistair would stop staring, moving slow enough that he wouldn't misbutton it and have to start again, even though he wanted to cover himself up fast. "With regard to Zevran, uh. Yeah. I did."

"Sorry," Alistair echoed him. "I shouldn't have just burst in here and asked you flat out like that. He was just so bloody *smug*, and I was angry, and then I come in here and you're all—" He gestured vaguely in the direction of Carver's chest.

"Why were you angry about that?" Carver asked. "Zevran said you turned him down." He sat on the edge of his bed, and Alistair turned the chair at the desk (which Carver never used) around, so he could sit there and face him.

Even still, he didn't look in Carver's eyes. "Zevran asked me why it bothers me, too. Grabbed my face, yanked me down, looked into my eyes, and said, '*Alistair, my friend, I want you to think very long, and very hard, on why you are so annoyed with me making love to your pretty friend*.'" He did a passable impression of Zevran's accent, honestly.

"And?"

"Well, I came straight here, so I didn't think very long," Alistair said. "I suppose... so, I've known Zevran a while now, and before him, I don't think I ever really knew any man who was just as interested in sleeping with men as with women, or if I did, they never told me. And I just sort of thought, *well, that's unusual*, and moved on. I was more worried about his knives than his other business."

"If you're going to say you're uncomfortable with men who—"



"No, no, I'm not." Alistair took a deep breath, let it out, still looking at his own hands, which were laced through one another on his lap. "It's just, I always considered that as his business, not to do with me. And then he and you—and I just felt so *jealous*, it ripped through me like—like—it was just stupid, how bothered I was. And all this way over here, I kept thinking *why...*"

"And?" Carver asked.

"I guess..." Alistair's face finally lifted, his eyes looking so warm and sad, like Garrett's mabari when you scolded him. "I never thought you were like that, either. So whenever I had... *thoughts*. Or dreams. About you—"

"*Thoughts* or *dreams* about me?" Carver couldn't quite keep an incredulous rise out of his voice, and Alistair winced.

"Sorry?"

"No, go on."

"I just sort of assumed it'd never happen?"

Any anger Carver felt was coalescing into embarrassment, and he wanted to roll into a ball and hide. "Maker's breath, Alistair, it's not like I don't also have *thoughts and dreams* sometimes."

"Right, I mean, everybody gets those, so I passed them off—"

"I should clarify," Carver said, feeling like his face was burning as bright as Andraste's pyre. "Thoughts and dreams *about you*."

"Oh?"

"Wipe that smug look *off*. Arse." Carver *did* bury his face in his hands, then.

"No, no, I think I want to hear about these dreams." Alistair's voice was closer, like he was leaning over to Carver.

"Fine," Carver said, lifting his head, cheeks still blazing red but it was okay, because Alistair was blushing, too, "I'll tell you mine, if you tell me yours: I dreamt that after that chat we had about how to get a woman into bed, you got in my lap and touched me, and got me off, and let me return the favor."

"*Damn.*" It was a word, but it sounded more like Alistair had been punched. "I just had a dream about kissing you, but that's... that's... alright, you know, it wasn't *a dream*, I actually had at least three dreams about kissing you."

Their eyes caught, and Alistair laughed. So did Carver. "Maker, we're fucking *awful* at this," Carver said.

"No wonder Zevran thought he had to grab my face to force me to come to grips with it all," Alistair sighed. "I just... I don't know quite what to say. I really, *really* like you, Carver. *Ugh*, saying that makes me feel like I'm twelve."

"It's a start, though, isn't it?" Carver asked. Finally, finally, he reached across the gap between them and put his hand in Alistair's. He had all the same calluses, both of them swordsmen to the core. "I really like you, and sometimes I dream of you. Where do we go from there?"

"I don't—wow. I don't know. I think I need to... sort of think about it. Think about it a lot, actually. And then we can talk about it some more, but for now..." Alistair cocked his head to the side, trying to work something out in his head. "I can't talk anymore about my feelings for you, but I don't want to leave."

"Then talk to me about something else." Carver kicked off the boots he'd just put on and situated himself at the head of his bed, so Alistair could come rest beside him. "Talk to me about Duncan."

Alistair situated himself at Carver's side, settling easy against him. "Alright, then, I'll tell you about Duncan. You'll tell me about Bethany, right? That was the deal, after all."

Carver told him about Bethany. How she was the kindest person you'd ever meet, how she used to climb into Carver's bed because she was scared of demons and Carver used to say he'd fight every monster in the Fade for her. How she used to make up songs, and sing them to him when he was grumpy until he was forced to laugh because she came up with something so silly. How she was the only person who really knew everything about him.

(Well. Most things. He hadn't told her about that time behind Barlin's woodshed with Peaches.)

Alistair told him about Duncan, how they met and Duncan saw something good, something *worthy* in him. He told Carver about his training as a Warden, the way he'd learned to fight but also the way he'd learned to respect his fellow Wardens and work as part of a team instead of squabbling with everybody around him. How Duncan nurtured the skills Alistair already had and never minded when Alistair rambled about some historical battle or another for far too long.

They only left because Carver's stomach started growling, and Alistair asked if he'd eaten, and Carver said, "*no, somebody came in here to talk to me about his feelings.*"

The particular sarcasm with which he said it made Alistair do the sad-puppy eyes again, and Carver didn't quite have the words to make it better without sounding too flippant. Instead, he leaned in and kissed Alistair, just a brief press of his lips to the corner of Alistair's mouth.

It was over before it really began, made that corner tilt up in a brilliant smile all the same.

## 8. Chapter 8

### Summary for the Chapter:

Roses from Alistair and a letter from Garrett.

### Notes for the Chapter:

THE BOYS! ARE FINALLY! TOGETHER!

I'm so proud of them. Sadly they don't get to fuck in this chapter but someday I'll stop cockblocking them. Not yet tho. Not yet.

Zevran asked if Carver was free again that night, but Alistair had already approached him sometime around midday and asked if Carver could come to his room after supper. Besides, he was pretty sure Zevran was asking for more sex, and, well, Alistair may not have been *courting* him, because you couldn't court another man, could you? But he was doing *something* that made Carver think maybe he ought not to be fucking Zevran again.

So Carver had to tell Zevran, "no, I think I actually have... another engagement."

Zevran laughed. "You look so surprised to say it!" He bounced up on the balls of his feet, leaning closer to he could talk without anyone hearing them. "Tell me—did a dear friend of mine finally come to grips with something very important about himself?"

Carver felt like a terrible gossip saying anything, but Zevran *was* the reason Alistair had come to his room in the first place. "Yeah," he said. "I'll be at Alistair's tonight."

"Good for you!" Zevran said, far too loud for an empty hall. "Use what I taught you, yes?"

*That* seemed like too much for a first time, when it came to Alistair, so Carver only said, "maybe."

Before he met Alistair, he took a look at the letter he'd been handed earlier that day. It was addressed in a blocky hand that was still fancier than it needed to be, with little flourishes on all the letters, like a very dwarven example of script. It was addressed to "SER CARVER HAWKE: CARE OF THE GREY WARDENS OF VIGIL'S KEEP" and had the Amell family crest stamped on the wax seal.

Dramatic fucker, Garrett.

The letter itself was in Garrett's hand—loose and curling, the letters all bleeding into one another, lines often scratched out or blotted where he lost his train of focus. It read:

*Carver,*

*It is good to hear you are well, and I hope the Wardens are keeping you out of trouble. Thank you for writing to me—it is lucky you happened to meet our Cousin, I am glad to hear you still have family where you are. Mother keeps telling everybody you work closely with the Hero of Ferelden. She's very proud. But she'll probably write you her own letter.*

*I relayed your message and Commander Amell's gift to Anders, and he and J. are both very pleased to have the ring back. Anders says to tell you that in a trunk below his bed, he left several books which he borrowed from somebody called Sigrun, as well as a shirt which belongs to his ex-lover. Which I believe is now your bed, if you're staying in his old room. He did not say anything about giving them back, and in point of fact told me not to mention this to you, but I figured you might want to know to whom those belong, as I am assuming you found it. He is extremely pleased Ser Pounce A Lot is well.*

*The repairs on the manor have gone well. The house is, frankly, too enormous and I dislike having so much empty space. It feels wrong, when there are so many people who barely have room to breathe in Kirkwall. By verdict of the cellars being so near to the clinic, Anders has agreed to stay here, which is good, because the situation in Kirkwall as a whole is not. The templars press in every day, and there is much going on with the Qunari that worries me. I am going to convince Isabela to move in here after her*

*lease expires on the room at the Hanged Man, and have made similar offers to Merrill and even Gamlen, but both of them are staying in Lowtown for the time being. Merrill refused me more kindly, obviously. She is well regardless, and is beloved among the alienage. I think she feels a duty to them to stay there.*

*There is a room here for you, when you have leave to visit, or if the Wardens have a reason to send you to Kirkwall. Darkspawn, however, may be the only problem this city doesn't have. I have written Amell to ask if she would like to visit for an upcoming event, and have asked that she bring you if possible. Of course, you may still refuse, but I wish for Mother's sake you wouldn't.*

*While you may be glad to be rid of this city, I want you to know that all of us in Kirkwall miss you.*

—Garrett

Carver was halfway through writing a response when the sun started going down. Instead of lighting a lantern and continuing, he saved the rest of it for later, quite unsure how to say, *"I'm not really certain Anders' aforementioned ex-lover knows he's his ex -lover,"* in a way Garrett wouldn't completely brush off.

All through supper, Alistair kept stealing glances at him like he'd never really looked at Carver before, even though they'd been side by side for months, now. There was a boyish shyness to his attention, like he kept forgetting he didn't need to look away when Carver caught him at it.

Will, because Zevran had stolen her place at the head of the table, took a seat beside Carver.

"You've heard from your brother, as well?" she said, leaning her elbow on the table.

"I have," he said.

He was glad he'd read the letter today instead of saving it, or Will saying, "so you know I'm taking you with me to Kirkwall, then," would have come as a massive surprise.

"How soon?" Carver asked.

"Some noble family is holding a gala to welcome the Amell house back into Kirkwall's high society," Will said. "It's next week. We leave in two days, to give us time to cross the Waking Sea."

Carver's nose wrinkled at '*high society*'. When Garrett said he'd sent an invitation to Will, Carver had assumed he'd asked her to the house for dinner, not a formal ball. "What exactly does this entail?" he asked.

"I'll get a tailor to see to you," Will said. "The Wardens don't have an official dress uniform, but this isn't the sort of gathering to show up at wearing armor, I should think."

There was a reason the Wardens didn't have a dress uniform, and it was because Wardens didn't go to this sort of thing.

"Can we bring Alistair?" Carver asked.

"Not unless you want him to cry. He hates formal gatherings."

"Well, so do I," Carver said. "Perhaps I want somebody to share in my suffering."

"We can't bring Alistair because somebody will recognize him," Will said. "Same reason we can't bring Nathaniel, although he probably wouldn't cry, just get extremely pissy. It's you and I, little cousin."

Carver looked across the table at Alistair, who was giving him a curious tilt of his head. "Can we bring Turnip?" he asked, his attention back to Will.

"Oh, yes. Now there's an idea. Let all the Marcher lords see a couple Fereldens walking in with their hounds. Really play up the stereotype."

"Are you being sarcastic?" Carver asked her.

"No," she said. "I actually think that would be hilarious. I'm going to have a little jacket made for him that matches mine."

Carver thought Garrett would be incredibly jealous he didn't think of it first, and so this was a brilliant idea.

— — —

"What is it Will was talking with you about earlier?"

They were in Alistair's room, Carver scanning over the titles on a stack of books piled up on the table beside the bed. Alistair had said there was something in his wardrobe he wanted to find for Carver, and had been shuffling through it for a long while, because his wardrobe was not very organized.

"She's taking me with her to Kirkwall. Apparently all the Amells got invited to some sort of formal banquet." Carver flicked his thumb against a bookmark sticking out of the topmost volume. "Although, I guarantee nobody invited Gamlen along."

Alistair's voice was a bit muffled because his head was shoved in the wardrobe. "Are you leaving me for Kirkwall?"

"Temporarily, yes, unless you've a sudden desire to join us for this whole circus." Carver flopped back onto the bed. "Ugh. I'm going to have to find somebody to sub in for me on that patrol with Sigrun tomorrow, since I've got an appointment with a *tailor*, now. She's gonna kill me if I ask Oghren, too."

Alistair sprawled out next to him, lying on his stomach, holding a flat rectangular package wrapped in cloth. It was probably a book, Carver thought. For all Alistair's boundless energy, he really enjoyed reading (much more than Carver ever had). It was the only time he was ever still. "I'll go with Sigrun tomorrow, Oghren can handle my recruits in training. And then my recruits will appreciate me more, because I'm not Oghren."



Carver turned his head to the side, catching Alistair looking down at him. This time, Alistair didn't turn away. "Thanks," Carver said. "Clears up one thing, at least."

"In return, you must show me your fancy party wear," Alistair said. "That's all I ask."

"Only if it doesn't look stupid."

"Oh, you *especially* have to show me if it looks stupid!"

Carver shoved Alistair on the shoulder with a good-natured, "*fuck right off*," and Alistair pushed back, but stopped with his hand on the middle of Carver's chest.

His hand rubbed gently back and forth, fingers tracing the line of the chains that held the two pendants Carver wore. "Hey. I really did have something for you."

"Oh, yeah, what is it?" Carver sat up, and Alistair reached for the little parcel, pulling at the string that kept it shut and tugging the cloth off.

"It's something I've kept hold of for a while," he said.

It wasn't a book. Instead, it was two panes of glass, with a dried rose pressed between them, still dark red as blood. It seemed an odd keepsake for a Warden to have, odder than Alistair's other trinkets, because it wasn't the sort of thing you'd find on the road. Glass like this would have to be specially made, and would cost a decent sum, besides.

Carver ran his fingertips along the edge of the frame until they bumped Alistair's. "What is it?" he asked.

"So, I found this right at the beginning of the Blight, and I had it pressed in a book for something like two years before I got ahold of something to frame it," Alistair said. "It might be a silly thing to hold onto, and I hadn't thought of it in a little bit, but then you talked about your hometown..."

He leaned a little further forward, so his forehead nudged against Carver's.

"I picked it in Lothering," Alistair said. "We stopped there for a day, right after Ostagar. The darkspawn must have swept the village soon after we left."

Carver looked down at the rose, and back up at what he could see of Alistair's face, lowered lashes and the line of his nose, the pink of his cheeks and lips. "It's from Lothering? The day before?"

"Yes," Alistair said.

Mother, Bethany, and Garrett would have been packing things up that day. Garrett would have been circling the town every so often, heading up the steps to the bridge to see if any soldiers from Ostagar were on their way in. Bethany would have been telling Mother they *had* to wait for Carver, that he was going to come, she *knew* it.

Carver, on that day, would have been running. He'd spent the night fighting and then the day running, stitches in his side as he made the journey from Ostagar to Lothering as fast as he could without keeling over. He'd thought of dropping his sword a dozen times because the weight of it slowed him down, but he ran into darkspawn, and it saved his life.

"It... wasn't the season for roses," Carver said.

"It was heading into winter, it wasn't the season for much of any flowers," Alistair said. "But these were blooming, the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. I picked it because I think I needed a reminder that there was still beauty even in a world that was falling apart around me."

Carver dropped his head onto Alistair's shoulders, tears burning hot in his eyes, knew Alistair could feel him sob.

"Are you alright?" No doubt, it was a little alarming.

"It wasn't the season for roses," Carver repeated, his voice shaky and wet. "Only one rosebush bloomed that late into the fall, because Da' put some sort of spell on it years ago. Mother fucking *hated* Doreen, she wanted to have better flowers—"

"It was your *mum's* rosebush?"

"Yeah. Must be."

He remembered those flowers, remembered picking them and stabbing his thumb with a thorn, sucking off the droplet of blood and glaring at the flowers like they were personally out to get him. He remembered bringing some inside on bad days for Mother, after Father passed, because there was something about their jewel-bright petals and the magic that still coursed through their stems that made him feel not so far away. He remembered braiding one of them (carefully stripped of those sharp, sharp thorns) into Bethany's hair before a festival on Summerday, because she wanted to impress a boy.

When Alistair said, "oh, *Carver*," he sounded like he might be crying, too.

For a long while they lay on the bed, facing one another, close enough that Alistair could put an arm around Carver and run his hand over his back. If Carver looked up, over Alistair's shoulder, he could see the framed rose resting against the pillow.

He told Alistair about his mother's roses, about her feud with the neighbors and Father casting a spell in the middle of the night with Garrett and Carver keeping watch. Alistair listened with his attention locked to Carver and nothing else, a rarity from a man who so often had seven different thoughts zipping through his head in all directions.

"I never thought I'd see anything from Lothering ever again," Carver said.

"I'm glad I could bring it to you," Alistair replied. "You know, it's still there. Not Lothering, not really, it's... mostly ruined, sadly, but there are still roses there. I went there during the thaw hunts."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Maybe... we go there sometime? We'll take Velanna, I think she'd know how to transport living plants. Vigil's Keep could use some magical roses, and maybe we could get some to Kirkwall somehow, for your mum."

Just the thought of it made Carver smile, terribly soft. "You are impossibly sweet, you know. You're probably the nicest person I've ever met."

"I've not always been," Alistair said. "I've been petty at times, and cruel, and a downright prat, but I've gotten better. And I've realized I like taking care of the people I care about most." He shifted a little closer, lowering his voice to a whisper. "That includes you, in case you were wondering."

"Oh," Carver said back, with nothing but astonishment in his voice. "I'm glad. I... care for you a lot, too. Maker, I'm no good at saying this sort of thing."

"You seem fine at it to me," Alistair said, but Carver was fairly certain he was just easy to please.

"I'm not," Carver repeated. "Always have been more suited to action."

Alistair reached out, pressed his thumb into the center of Carver's chin. "And what action do you mean to take now?"

"Mean to kiss you," Carver said, because Alistair wasn't Zevran, Carver couldn't just kiss him without asking and be sure he'd not be upset. "If you want it."

*"Yeah."*

Carver lifted his head just enough that the angle wouldn't be awkward, and pressed forward. Alistair's hand on his back curled into a fist in his shirt. Alistair made this soft little noise and breathed hard against Carver's cheek, and Carver put a hand on his ribs to feel more of that breath, heavy like they were sparring instead of kissing.

Alistair's stubble scraped against Carver's chin, a new sensation, of course, because the only other man Carver had kissed was an elf. He was eager and soft and warm, and he rolled onto his back and let Carver on top of him. Alistair's body under his was firmer in some places than Zevran's (his arms, his hands, his shoulders) and softer in some (his stomach, his chest, his

thighs) and he was still his usual, awkward self, his hands resting like he didn't know where to put them.

Carver snagged one of his hands and gave him a little guidance. Alistair didn't take long to catch on, squeezing the back of Carver's neck and resting his other on Carver's thigh. When Carver pulled away, Alistair opened his eyes too soon, and was cross-eyed trying to focus on Carver when he did. He blinked, his vision evening out.

"Wow," Alistair breathed. "You're really quite good at that."

Carver laughed, dropping back onto the bed beside him. "I think you're just easy to please."

"Give yourself some credit," Alistair said. "That felt *good*. Maker."

"I can do much more than that," Carver said, tracing his fingertip along Alistair's collarbones.

"Can you, now?"

"Well. Not tonight, maybe." Carver's hand paused over Alistair's chest, feeling his heart beat for just a moment. "But Zevran taught me a few things."

Alistair's eyes flicked away from him, as he suddenly became very interested in the bedspread.

"What is it?" Carver asked, pushing aside a few strands of hair that fell into Alistair's face.

"It's just—" Alistair laughed in that self-deprecating way he had. "I'll not be *near* as good at this as Zevran, that's all."

Carver carefully tried not to laugh, but knew he was smirking anyhow. "Felt this way about you since before I met Zevran, yeah? And as far as he goes... I couldn't handle a man like that every night."

"What did he do with you, exactly?" Alistair asked.

"You want *details*?" After just admitting insecurities about another man Carver had been with, he couldn't help but find that suspect.

Alistair shrugged. "Maybe I wanna know what he taught you."

"You *know* I'm no good at just talking through all that," Carver said. "Better at action. I can *show* you."

"Do you promise?"

"Yeah." He found Alistair's hand between them on the bedspread and squeezed it. "But tonight, I'm sort of... hollowed out, over it all. Thinking of home."

"I know," Alistair said. Carver may not have had the specifics, but he knew there were some memories Alistair carried with him just like Carver carried his memory of Lothering.

Alistair pulled Carver into his arms, pressing both of them tight together in a way that was more comforting than sensual, letting Carver relax against his body in a way he'd not done since... forever, maybe. Carver always let others rest while he watched, constantly in tension like a bow that was always drawn, just in case he needed to fire. He was the protector of his family, with nobody to shield him, except now there was a man who curled around him like a fortress, and held Carver's heart tenderly between them both, like Carver might be fragile once in a while.

It was the same gentleness with which he'd held the glass-framed rose that still lay just a ways from them on the bed. And Carver, who had spent too long pretending he was not breakable, permitted himself to soften in Alistair's grasp.

— — —

Being fitted by a tailor was even *worse* than being fitted for armor, because tailors came with *pins*, and instead of Will cornering him for a chat, it was Alistair. He'd believed Carver wasn't going to show him whatever fancy

clothes they set him up with, and came to witness the wreck of it all in person instead.

"The color is nice, at least," Alistair said. Because it was nearing summer, they'd gone with a blue that was a little lighter than the usual Wardens' colors, although not too bright as to be ostentatious. "It makes your eyes look pretty."

"The sleeves are less nice," Carver said. They were too tight, restrictive enough that he wouldn't be able to get a proper swing—but then again, he wasn't going to be bringing a sword to a soiree. Also, he was going to be hot, no matter how light the fabric. There were too many layers.

"At least they didn't give you the puffed ones."

The tailor, an elderly woman with a demeanor almost as sharp and terrifying as Mistress Woolsey, finally decided to give her opinion. "Something like that on somebody with your shoulders would just look garish."

"I am told I do not have the build for formal wear," Carver said. "I am, apparently, a hulking barbarian with massive shoulders, and this, apparently, is very simple suiting that still seems quite complicated if you ask me—" He froze, terrified, because the pins were back. The tailor probably wouldn't stick him, because then he'd get blood on the silk (was this silk?) but she certainly wasn't making efforts to convince him so, as she spun him back around to do something to the trousers, which were also quite fitted.

"I went to see Will's first," Alistair said. "Her outfit looks a bit like yours, but it's all black. And her sleeves *are* all billowy, so you should count yourself lucky your shoulders are too hulking and manly to suit the latest fashion."

Despite all his teasing, Alistair's cheeks were pink when Carver turned back around. "I take it my arse looks fantastic," he said.

"Shut up," Alistair replied. "I'm going out on *your* patrol, but I wanted to know if I'd see you tonight."

"Yes," Carver said. "But Will wants us out tomorrow morning early."

Alistair winced. "My sympathies, then. At least Zevran brought her a lot of Antivan coffee."

The tailor told him not to move and left for a moment, probably to find more pins. Sharper ones.

Alistair gave a quick glance around the room (a separate area attached to Will's quarters which was specifically for dressing and was mostly used to store a lot of spare armor because Will had no need of a dressing room) and once he was satisfied that nobody was around, he stepped forward and stole a kiss. "You look good." He snuck another. "Really good."

"I look like a twat," Carver said. Fucking *brocade*. Every inch of him was decorated in tiny flowers and leaves. Garrett was going to laugh himself sick once he saw.

"You look like a twat with pretty eyes and handsome shoulders and a fantastic arse. How long 'til she comes back?"

"Doesn't matter, you're gonna be late to meet Sigrun, and she's gonna headbutt you. And she wears those horns on her helmet."

"Fine, yes." Alistair kissed him one last time, on his cheek.

"You're bloody adorable," Carver said.

If the tailor was wondering why he was quite pink when she returned, she didn't bother to ask.

— — —

That night, Carver barely made it through Alistair's door and he was being kissed.



Since his arrival in Amaranthine, Carver had seen Alistair in plenty of different states of dress and undress, but never quite this *cozy*. He was in an old sweater with a loose knit, the hem unraveling in places, the fabric soft under Carver's fingers. He had left the trousers he was wearing earlier somewhere, and was just in a pair of leggings too patched and careworn to go underneath armor any longer.

He was so *warm* underneath. His skin was soft, but for the puckered trails of old scars, and there was a layer of fat over his muscle that had some give when Carver squeezed at his hips and his waist.

"I want—" Alistair said, but before he could thoroughly express those desires, he kissed Carver again.

"Yes?" Carver asked, his nose pressing into Alistair's cheek.

"I don't know," Alistair groaned, kissing Carver's jaw. "I want to go to bed."

"Go to sleep?" Carver cupped the back of his head, gently tugging until Alistair looked at him, "or go to bed?"

"Bed," Alistair said, no hesitation before his answer but a quizzical pause after. "Carver, are you taller than me?"

"Always have been." Carver nudged him back toward the bed, steadying him with a hand on his hip so Alistair didn't trip over his own boots, piled up on the rug. "You want me on your lap?"

"Yes, please. You on top, is, is—yes. Good."

This, too, was a bit different to Carver's usual. He was accustomed to being on top of women but also to the feeling of not wanting to crush them, having to hold back some of his own weight. Alistair, though, was just as sturdy as Carver. More so, even.

Alistair held onto Carver's hips while they kissed, then moved to his waist, still not quite sure where he ought to touch. Carver, personally, would be

fine if Alistair just grabbed his ass and rolled their hips together, but he understood the hesitation.



Carver kissed Alistair until he was breathless, panting and pushing up under him, then slowed, settling against him, letting Alistair tuck his face into his collar and hide there.

“Want to slow down?” Carver asked.

“Maaaaaybe?” Alistair said. He sighed, sort of deflated, and dropped to lay flat on his back. “Listen, Carver—“

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want,” Carver said.

“It’s not that. Not quite.” Alistair’s hands were on his thighs, but he was just rubbing at the texture of Carver’s trousers, tracing the seam of them with his thumbs. It was more like he was trying to ground himself than like he was trying to arouse Carver. “There’s something you ought to understand, about the first—the *only*— time I had sex.”

“I take it things went badly?”

“Magical sex ritual to impregnate a witch with an archdemon baby in order to prevent future Blights and save the lives of the last remaining Wardens in Ferelden? Is that? Bad?” Alistair groaned, scraping his fingers through his hair and making it stick on end. “Weird first time for everybody involved, I’ll tell you that.”

If Carver were a more tactful person, he might have a placating response for that, or he might have anything that wasn’t a drop-jawed, wide-eyed stare. “So, uh. I suppose I understand why you said you weren’t sure if that counts.”

“It wasn’t exactly very... *erotic*, that’s for certain.”

Carver was a bit fucked up over this man, because despite the context, the sound of Alistair’s voice shaping the word ‘*erotic*’ really did something for him.

“I... how does that even *work*?”

“There were a lot of candles. And a few spells. Some chanting. *Maker*, I still don’t know how I managed to actually. Do it.” Alistair gave him a lopsided little grin. “As long as you don’t plan to start doing any chanting, I think it’ll be a *lot* easier for you to get me, uh. To get me.”

“Yeah, I—of course not. I wasn’t about to—no.” Carver got off his lap, lying down beside him, and Alistair turned to face him, close enough that their noses brushed. “*Maker*, Alistair, I knew you’d not exactly had a normal life, but that’s...” He tipped his face down so he wasn’t sighing directly into Alistair’s face.

“Take it slow with me, then?” Alistair said, giving him a sweet little grin.

“I think I’d like that,” Carver said. “A lot of this is new for me too, you know.”

“Says the man who slept with Zevran.” Alistair laughed. “I’m sure he got you *very* accustomed to sex with a man.”

Carver, as he was wont to when his sexual history was brought up before he was ready, said something stupid and then immediately regretted it. “What, are you jealous?”

Alistair, as *he* was wont, answered with surprising candor. “I was at first,” he said. “When I found out, I was *madly* envious. But then I realized that was because he was with you and I wasn’t, and, well.” He gently traced Carver’s cheek down to his jaw.

“You did something about that,” Carver said.

“I did something about that.” Alistair bumped his knuckle underneath Carver’s chin. “Now I’m only sort of anxious because I can say for certain there’s no way I can do to you whatever Zevran did for you.”

“I don’t need you to do what Zevran did for me,” Carver said. “It’s you that matters, Alistair. Not the way we do anything.”

Alistair’s eyes shone like he might be a little misty over such simple words. He cleared his throat, but didn’t say anything.

“Can I tell you something sort of embarrassing?” Carver asked.

Alistair, seeming to know what a rare and delicate thing Carver was giving him, said, “only if you really want to.”

“You know Gwen, that girl at the Crown and Lion? The first time we were together, I got done and I was sort of disappointed, just because I wanted to be cuddled.” He added, “which wasn’t part of what we were doing, so it wasn’t as if I ought to have expected that from her,” and considered leaving it lie, letting Alistair put together the rest if he would. “I came downstairs and sat beside you and cuddled up to you because I needed somebody who *would* take care of me that way, even if just in friendship.”

“Carver, you *know* I love to snuggle,” Alistair said. “And Will hardly ever has time to anymore, and Nathaniel scares me, and Velanna scares me more, so there’s really just Sigrun because I’m not getting within a foot of Oghren—point being, come here.”

Carver did. Alistair wrapped his arms around him and let Carver put his head on his chest (which, by the way, wow, his chest was very nice) and put one leg over Carver’s and did his best impersonation of an octopus.

Carver said, “did Will *used* to cuddle you regularly?”

“Oh, yeah.” Alistair’s voice was muffled and his snort of a laugh warm in Carver’s hair. “Me, her, Leliana, Turnip, all in a big pile. Zevran too, although he never wanted to cuddle the dog... Antivans.”

Carver made a hum of agreement, not quite understanding why anyone wouldn’t want to cuddle a dog. The bonus warmth alone was worth it. And Turnip seemed to bathe more regularly than Garrett’s hound.

“We don’t have to do anything... more than this,” Carver said.

Alistair let out a long breath, like a sigh of relief. “I mean, I knew that was the case but I appreciate you saying it aloud, especially since, you know. Bad past experiences.”

“I know.” Carver patted his back, then drew his hand down to rest at Alistair’s waist. “We’ll take our time with things. I’ll come back from Kirkwall, and we can maybe...”

“Yeah.” Alistair’s voice was lower, a little rougher. He pulled back until he was positioned so he could look Carver directly in the face, keeping their legs tangled together. “I don’t want you getting the impression I don’t *absolutely* want to sleep with you. Because I do. I really do. And if I think about it too much I’m not going to be able to sleep.”

“I got you,” Carver said, meeting him for a kiss. “We’ll just sleep, yeah?”

“Mm.” Alistair still watched him, like he was waiting for Carver to close his eyes first. Carver put his face back against Alistair’s chest, because if he looked into those brown doe eyes any longer, he was going to be sorely tempted to kiss Alistair until the dawn.

**Author's Note:**

If you want to see my occasional thoughts and feelings on how much I love Carver, find me on Tumblr [@luddlestons](#) and if you want to experience me being a nerd about classics, visit me on Twitter [@luddlestons](#)